

## The Revolutionary

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/12952305) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/12952305>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a> , <a href="#">Graphic Depictions Of Violence</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Other</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Transformers Generation One</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Megatron &amp; Ratchet</a> , <a href="#">Megatron/Starscream</a> , <a href="#">Megatron/Everyone</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Ratchet (Transformers)</a> , <a href="#">Megatron</a> , <a href="#">Starscream</a> , <a href="#">Ironhide</a> , <a href="#">Wheeljack</a> , <a href="#">Soundwave</a> , <a href="#">Constructicons</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">War</a> , <a href="#">Revolution</a> , <a href="#">Orgy</a> , <a href="#">Consent Issues</a>
Series:	Part 4 of <a href="#">Transformers works</a>
Stats:	Published: 2017-12-08 Words: 45899

## The Revolutionary

by [astolat](#)

### Summary

“I never went down,” Ratchet said.

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

“Megatron! *Megatron!*” The yells had an edge of real terror that triggered Ratchet’s crisis management submodule. It bypassed his primary motivator, kicked his emotional routines down to tertiary systems, and redirected power and processor time to analysis and deep-storage access for quick retrieval and selection of intervention methods. About half a microsecond later he realized he was lying unmoving on a moving surface that was bringing him closer to some decidedly suboptimal radiation levels, and also for no reason at all he’d left his motor and sensory units offline.

He booted them up and turned his head to see that the yelling was coming from Starscream, who was at nearly the front of a conveyor belt they were all clamped on, which was heading straight for a *neural destabilizer field*, with a whole forest of cutters and clamps waiting after it—oh Primus, they’d landed on a *disassembly* line. And Brawn was right ahead of Starscream on the belt.

Ratchet tried to get loose, but one attempt was enough to tell him the clamping units were made of some heavy-duty duranium alloy past the tensile strength of his armor: he wasn’t going to be able to break them. But Brawn should’ve been able to, if he hadn’t been too damaged in the crash landing. “Brawn!” he called. “Brawn, wake up!”

“I’m awake,” Brawn said back, in a dull voice.

“Get up!”

“Can’t move,” Brawn said, still in monotone. “My motivator’s blocked.”

“What?” Ratchet said, and then realized *Starscream* should’ve been able to pop the restraints too, which meant his motivators were probably offline, too, even though Seekers had two.

“I can’t move either,” Ironhide said, from next to him, also sounding more or less like he was talking about daily variations in atmospheric temperature.

“None of us can move! Wake *Megatron*, you idiot!” Starscream yelled. He was obviously stuck in a low-level self-preservation panic subroutine: it had overridden his standard emotional routines, which was why he could feel *scared*, but it wasn’t bypassing his motivators.

Ratchet turned his head the other way: Bumblebee was clamped next to him, unconscious, three different kinds of lubricant oozing out of a bad crack in his side panel, and Megatron was right after him, also out, with scorch marks all up and down his side: he’d clearly taken a hit on their way down and his self-repair systems had grabbed primary power to work on it. Ratchet wasn’t generally inclined to take advice from Starscream, and he was even less inclined to look to Megatron for help, but in this case, it didn’t even take triage logic to see there wasn’t any other mech he could reach who was going to be able to break the clamps anyway. Ratchet managed to pop open his left arm diagnostics unit with a scrape of metal and put out a neuro probe on a long extension arm and jabbed Megatron at the base of the skull.

His eyes flickered to life red, but his face stayed as expressionless as the others. “Megatron!” Starscream shripped again, and after a moment Megatron very slowly frowned, and then slowly turned his head, and he saw the destabilizer field and the waiting jaws beyond it.

“If you *can* move, now would be a very good time,” Ratchet said. He’d also gotten out his microcutter on the other side and was working as fast as he could on his own left arm restraint, but he wasn’t going to get it in time to save Brawn. Possibly not in time to save Ironhide.

Megatron’s eyes started glowing brighter and brighter, probably power rerouting back to his central processor, and then all of a sudden his jaw clenched up and with a snarl he was surging up from the conveyor belt, a triple set of restraints popping off like they were made of cheap petroplastics. He staggered on his feet a moment, but then he reached down and grabbed the belt with both hands and just ripped the entire thing with all of them on it off its base and dumped it to the floor. Brawn was so close to the end that his head clanged on the floor panels.

An alarm started blaring from speakers overhead. “*Intractables loose on the recycling level*,” it said loudly, the translation coming a full second delayed: meant the original wasn’t anywhere in his language banks. They had to be a long way from home. “*Intractables loose on the recycling level. Suppression units report immediately. Intractables loose on the—*”

The alarm squawked off as Megatron blasted the speakers out of the wall with a single shot. He looked up and down the line of the belt full of inert mechs and then glared down at Ratchet and snapped, “What’s wrong with them?”

“Our motivators have been taken offline somehow,” Ratchet said. “If you felt like popping me loose, I could take a shot at figuring out how to fix it.”

“Get *me* loose!” Starscream squalled: he was tilted crazily above the floor himself, half tipped over onto Brawn.

Megatron ignored him and bent down and pulled Ratchet's restraints off. "Go see if you can get Hook or Soundwave back online to help," he said, and then started yanking restraints off down the line, starting with Ironhide. Ratchet got up and did a quick once-over as he ran past the belt: everybody was accounted for, on both sides. That wasn't really good news, since the Decepticons had outnumbered them three-to-one at the moment the warp engines on the *Excelsior* had blown up, but on the brighter side, if Megatron and all his top brass were here, not to mention the Constructicons, that meant the decoy run had worked, and Optimus and the others on the *Perihelion* had probably made it to the dark side of Cybertron without being spotted. All they needed now was a couple of weeks in the ruins of Iacon without being discovered, and there would be a real Autobot base on Cybertron again. The Decepticons wouldn't be prying them loose anytime soon, not with the new Jupiter power station giving them a steady lifeline of energon that would beat what the Decepticon raiders could squeeze out of an increasingly well-armed Earth. Ratchet's internal chronometer said it had been six atomic hours since the crash, and right now, it sure looked like they were going to be pretty busy here for a while yet to come—wherever *here* actually was.

Hook had a giant gouge from his right shoulder all the way down to his central pivot and was down for the count without some heavy-duty repairs, but Ratchet found Soundwave pinned all the way at the other end of the line, undamaged and conscious—but just as inert as the others. "All right, let's have a look at you," Ratchet said. "I'm guessing you can't get your motivator online either?"

"Affirmative," Soundwave said calmly. "Low-level subspace communications partially disrupted as well."

"Huh," Ratchet said. Soundwave would know, since he used those channels to communicate with his cassettes. Which implied that whatever was doing it was *communicating*—"Ah, crap. It's got to be nanites."

"Agreed," Soundwave said.

"Right," Ratchet said grimly. Nasty little things. "Well, on the bright side, if I clear yours, you should be able to isolate their communication channel and inject a self-destruct program to clear everyone else."

"Affirmative," Soundwave said, without bothering to state the obvious problem, which was how the hell was Ratchet going to get *Soundwave's* nanites cleared, at least when he didn't have a nice handy persona backup unit to dump him into while his body got sanitized.

"Well, Autobot?" Megatron said, leaning down to rip off Soundwave's restraints. Soundwave just slid straight to the floor. "If you're under the impression we have infinite time before someone responds to the disruption to this facility, I suggest you re-evaluate."

"We've got less time than you think: it's nanites," Ratchet said shortly. Now that he knew, he could actually tell: his diagnostics systems were picking up a high level of micro-disruptions throughout his circuitry, the kind of thing that generally got ignored by the evaluator function as harmless minor fluctuations in power levels. It hadn't been enough time for nanites to reproduce that much, so whoever had done this must have injected all of them with a massive payload of the things. And if the nanites had been programmed to be reasonably smart, he had about half an hour to work before they got into his shielded crisis submodule and shut *him* down again. Megatron was probably on a clock, too, depending on how isolated whatever unit it was that he was bypassing *his* motivators with. "Soundwave, how much of your persona can you dump into secondary memory?"

"Insufficient," Soundwave said. "Secondary memory bandwidth also compromised."

"Dammit," Ratchet said.

“Think quickly,” Megatron said, and headed for the big double doors at the far end of the chamber. In a second Ratchet realized why: there were faint but increasing vibrations coming through the floor. And since nobody in here was moving around, that meant they were about to have company.

“All right,” Ratchet muttered. “You can disrupt the nanites, you just can’t *decide* to do it. I can decide, but I don’t have the capability. We’re going to have to do a low-level neural linkup to route your processing through my crisis unit. You up for that?”

“Circumstances dictate an affirmative answer,” Soundwave said. “However: all neural access ports are heavily shielded and cannot presently be opened.”

“No kidding,” Ratchet said, opening up his left thigh storage panel: it was lucky he had geared up all the way for this mission. For some definition of luck. He took out the subatomic veiner and held it in front of Soundwave’s optic sensor. “This isn’t going to be fun. But if it makes you feel any better, soon as we’re linked up, this’ll hurt me as least as much as it hurts you.”

Soundwave looked at it and said, “Proceed.”

“And hurry!” Megatron shouted back at them, as the first whine of a cutter came on the other side of the doors. He’d already ripped out the control circuitry and was barricading them with every piece of equipment he could tear off the walls, but it was clearly only a stopgap measure.

It was a tossup which was worse: having to literally drill through another mech’s neural access port by hand without the benefit of electron-level scanning, having to share the pain of it afterwards, or having to let Soundwave *inside his brain*. Well, no, it wasn’t really a tossup: that last scenario actually figured in a significant fraction of the more traumatic visualizations that Autobots occasionally got during their defrag sessions. Ratchet had experienced a couple of them himself over the millennia. On top of that, by the time he got the link up, the nanites were disrupting about five percent of the signal from his crisis unit, which meant if Soundwave didn’t work fast, they were going to be suspended again still linked, in which case Ratchet was just going to hope they *did* get disassembled very soon after.

“Access to crisis unit established,” Soundwave said.

“Yeah,” Ratchet said dimly, focusing past the agony to keep his internal circuitry diagnostics active in main memory. He had his low-level programming completely locked down, but if he stopped monitoring even for a second, Soundwave was absolutely going to take the chance of inserting some helpful higher-level instructions to be triggered automatically under some future conditions, like for instance “cut the largest visible fuel line in the middle of the next field surgery you do on Optimus Prime” or something.

Fortunately, there was a pretty good incentive for Soundwave to hurry it up, namely Megatron snarling, “They’re coming!” above their heads. He’d backed up to stand in front of them now, and his fusion cannon was powering up. He was conserving energon, which cut his charging speed by a lot, but it was glowing almost half-power before the barricade groaned and a shower of sparks burst out as a hole was cut through it. Two green-armored humanoid mechs came marching through the gap, and the floor reverberated underneath Ratchet’s feet as Megatron blasted them. They both collapsed, and the two right after them, but more were right behind pushing them through, and the hole was being widened—

“Nanite communications channel isolated,” Soundwave said, and before he’d even finished talking, Ironhide was roaring, “I’m gonna *rip these brain-twistin’ mechs to pieces!*” and Ratchet gasped and canceled every last bit of Soundwave’s access as fast as his processor could go.

To be fair, not that Soundwave deserved fair, he didn't fight it; he was actually reaching up and physically ripping out the cable between them at the same time. He surged up off the floor and was into the fighting at Megatron's side just as the doorway burst all the way open and a small army of the green-armored units came pouring through, firing phase weapons.

Brawn thumped Ratchet on the shoulder in approval, him and Ironhide going by to plow into the hostile mechs, and Ratchet staggered back from the front line with his head still pounding with agony. He was a big proponent of accurate pain processing normally, but times like these, he could see the point of the mechs who occasionally tried to talk him into doing Decepticon-style pain suppression jobs on their sensory units.

Working one at a time, Ratchet dragged Bumblebee and Wheeljack and Hook and Thundercracker into a line, tipped the wreck of the conveyor belt over to shield them from stray blasts, and got to work. At least the fighting was pretty solidly crammed up against the front of the room. He got Wheeljack and Hook stabilized as best he could, clamping all the torn lubrication veins and rerouting primary circuits around the damaged zones where he could, but there wasn't going to be any fixing Hook's injury here and now, and there was a big ugly hole right where Wheeljack's lower left hip servo should've been; he wasn't going to be walking anytime soon. There wasn't any point bringing the two of them back online now: instead Ratchet redirected all primary and secondary power to their self-repair systems and moved on.

He badly wanted to work on Bumblebee next, but his combat triage unit implacably informed him that Thundercracker was less than five astrominutes of work from battle-ready and hey, there was kind of an important fight going on over there and if they lost it, Wheeljack and Bumblebee weren't getting better anyway, so Ratchet gritted his teeth, reseated Thundercracker's memory access unit, and gave his core a quick jolt of energy to boot him up. "What in the—" Thundercracker said, sitting up, but the shrill whine of Starscream's null ray went off, drowning out whatever else he was saying, and as soon as he saw the fighting, he got up and charged right in. Decepticons: not good for much *but* fighting, in Ratchet's opinion, but you couldn't argue they weren't good for *that*.

"Hey, ow," Bumblebee said groggily, when Ratchet got him up and running. "Also, that doesn't feel so great. What happened?"

"Yeah, sorry, buddy," Ratchet said. "I've pretty much got you stuck together with cabling and gumtack. Think you can stand?"

"Yeah, sure, no problem," Bumblebee said, which didn't always mean he actually could, but this time they managed to get him slightly wobbly up on his feet, just as one last thundering blast echoed through the chamber, and the last few mechs got pasted all over the back wall.

Megatron rolled his shoulder grimacing and turned around. "Status!"

"Local communications network penetrated," Soundwave said. "Additional units converging on our location: estimated time of arrival three hundred fifty-six astroseconds."

"We've got to get out of here!" Starscream said, an edge of panic still riding his voice. Seekers hated to be trapped away from aerial exit routes even under *good* circumstances. "We're penned up like Altairian fishers in this place."

"Yes, Starscream, thank you for that spectacular tactical insight," Megatron said. He looked at Ratchet. "Casualties?"

"Everyone's mobile except Hook and Wheeljack," Ratchet said. "I've got them stabilized, but actually getting them functional is going to take six uninterrupted hours at least." He could see

Ironhide scowling, and yeah, reporting to Megatron was odd as hell, but this didn't seem like the best time and place to remind the Decepticons that actually they were all enemies.

"All right," Megatron said. "How far underground are we?"

"I'm having difficulty determining that," Scrapper said. "The radiation levels are bizarrely inconsistent. There's a few wavelengths of what appears to be solar radiation coming from *beneath* us, which shouldn't be capable of penetrating through a planetary core, and meanwhile there's an entirely different set of—"

"Take an educated guess," Megatron growled.

"A hundred and fifty meters," Scrapper said hastily. "Nine levels, judging by the size of this one."

Megatron nodded. "We'll need to blast our way up. Scrapper, find a weak point and brace the surrounding ceiling. Soundwave, launch Laserbeak and Buzzsaw. As soon as we've broken through each level, I want them to go through and mine the passageways on either side. Long Haul, take Hook. Skywarp, get Wheeljack."

"What? Why! He'll slow me down!" Skywarp protested.

Megatron snorted. "You can't carry one sixteen-ton Autobot without slowing down? Stop complaining." He pointed at Ratchet. "We have precisely one operational field medic at the moment, and I want him *free to work*, or we'll *all* get slowed down. Get moving!"

Skywarp muttered, and he wasn't particularly gentle heaving Wheeljack over his shoulder, but Ratchet had enough confidence in his patch job not to worry about that: at least, not nearly as much as he'd worried about having to talk Megatron into going slow enough that they could keep up carrying Wheeljack. It was going to be hard enough keeping up anyway when they were going vertical.

Ironhide and Brawn joined him, and Brawn slung Bumblebee's arm over his shoulders, giving him an assist. "One hell of a mess we got ourselves into this time," Ironhide muttered, looking over the Decepticons. Scrapper already had the other Constructicons putting supports up bracing the ceiling in a wide circle, and Megatron, Starscream, Thundercracker, and Soundwave were all underneath it, powering up their primary weapons systems. It was more than a little intimidating when you didn't have, say, Optimus Prime and Grimlock at your back. Especially when Ratchet glanced back the *other* way at the grotesque vivisection line still eager to take them all to pieces.

"Three short bursts. Fire!" Megatron said, and the other three blasted the ceiling together, and then they all ducked out of the way and Megatron let loose: the fusion cannon roared and the ceiling more or less fell apart, leaving a ragged hole.

Laserbeak and Buzzsaw instantly darted up. "Chamber above clear," Soundwave said.

"Constructicons, go!" Megatron ordered, and Scrapper and the others instantly shot up and got to work on the floor above.

"Let's go," Ironhide said, and they all ran forward, shooting cables up through the hole to haul themselves up as the Decepticons flew through.

They made it through two more floors before a big pack of the green mechs caught up to them on the sixth level, and it turned into a special kind of hell. Ratchet hadn't been able to pay much attention to the fighting down below, but now he had a front-row view, since there was fighting all around him, and it was—nightmarish. The mechs were self-aware, they had to be; their tactical adjustment times

were too fast and too individualized for them to have dumb processors or be under centralized control. But they fought like someone had erased their self-preservation routines. Megatron was literally slugging them three deep with every shot and they still kept coming straight at him, like their strategy was to use their own corpses to get in his way. At first the Decepticons shouted insults and yells while they fought—Ironhide and Brawn were doing some yelling of their own, too—but the green mechs stayed totally blank. Their faces *had* expression modules, limited but there; Ratchet could see the wiring in the smashed cranial units that fell near his feet. But they weren't *using* them. It was like they didn't really care much either way about the fight, but they weren't going to stop coming, either.

The Decepticons actually stopped yelling after a while, like not getting anything back had silenced them. The only sound left was the scrape of metal on metal and the blasting of weapons fire, and overhead the alarms that kept blaring, “*Intractables loose in quadrant nineteen. Intractables loose in quadrant nineteen,*” until somebody shot them out again, and then the same alert just kept coming more distantly, echoing down from the corridors in either direction.

Ratchet tried to stay focused on specifics: pulling anyone who took a bad hit into the interior and doing a quick patch job, doling out shots of lubricant and oil, doing fast bypasses on burned-out circuits and swapping in minor components if he had good replacements on hand. He had been in a lot of tough spots over the millennia, but this made his whole processor glitch into waste cycles—the horrible close-quarters fighting, the cold expressionless faces pressing in, and the feeling of being trapped—not knowing how much farther they still had to go to get out, not even knowing *why*—these people had found all of them hurt and unconscious after a crash landing, and they hadn't even bothered to ask questions, they'd just tossed them all straight into a trash bin, and now they were trashing *themselves* by the dozens just trying to keep the lid on.

And if they did just keep coming—Ratchet had a monitor on all the Autobots' fuel levels, and the Decepticons used even more power than they did. The numbers weren't looking good. Starscream shot another two point-blank in the optics with his null rays, and kicked their bodies backwards out of his way. Ratchet forced himself to grab them and pull them in: a quick pop of two bolts and he had their torso internals exposed. That produced another grotesque discovery: their fuel routing had a clear Cybertronian influence. Which meant they'd at least seen some Cybertronian's internals, some other time—Ratchet deliberately cut power to his emotional routines. He'd have to pay for that with extra defragging cycles later, but for now, he needed to work. Thinking about the situation coldly, the similarity was useful: he traced the lines and located the backup fuel chamber in fifteen astroseconds, and discovered they were *big*, and completely full, like these mechs didn't even have to worry about resources, about hunting for energon and squabbling over it. But if they didn't have resource problems, why would they be so gratuitously hostile—Ratchet shoved the question down and boosted power to his triage logic center instead. “Megatron!” he yelled. “Throw me a refueling line!”

Megatron barely paused shooting long enough to pull out a siphon line and toss it back to him, and Ratchet quickly hooked it up: fuel chamber to his sanitizing unit to Megatron's line. Megatron's system sucked the fuel down in three astroseconds flat, and he jerked his head round. “Is there *more* of that?” he demanded.

Ratchet held up the second fuel chamber. “Sixteen astroliter capacity, full up of triple-refined energon.”

“In that case, all of you, *stand back,*” Megatron said, and everyone winced as the fusion cannon whined instantly up to full blinding power. Ratchet had never actually heard Megatron firing at full power before: the roar of it stunned half his audio receptors offline, and the entire corridor full of mechs on Megatron's side was completely blown away. Megatron whirled around, and all of them

Autobot and Decepticon alike flung themselves flat out of the way as he blasted the other side too. He dropped his arm with the cannon smoking, the internals still glowing and his entire massive chest heaving as his cooling units frantically worked to transfer out the excess heat. “Is it safe to siphon directly?” he demanded. “What impurities are there?”

“Opposite problem,” Ratchet said, his sanitizing unit finishing analysis. “It’s completely pure, not even a trace of residue. All *our* systems are designed for sludge, comparatively speaking. Pump it too fast, and you’ll end up flooding your neural circuitry. You all need to set your fuel pumps to quarter-speed.”

“All right. Give me that,” Megatron said, and Ratchet gave him the second chamber. He hooked himself to it. “All the rest of you, retrieve a chamber if you can, quickly. One only,” Megatron added, as all the Decepticons dived at fallen mechs with intact torsos. Ratchet got to work, tossing chambers to Ironhide and Brawn and Bumblebee as fast as he could extract them, and a few more for Decepticons who dragged bodies over to him. “Fuel up, and cover me on both sides as we go. We’re getting out of this hole. Constructicons, bring the Autobots.”

Scrapper grabbed Ratchet around the waist. “Hold on!” he snapped. Ratchet hung on to him as Megatron raised his cannon and blew out the entire ceiling even as he flew up towards it. The Decepticons all flew straight up after him as he kept firing, blasting one enormous gaping hole after another, going straight up. There wasn’t any debris to worry about exactly; at full power, the fusion cannon didn’t *blast* the construction materials, it *vaporized* them. It left behind superhot air full of liquefied elements they’d be scrubbing off their armor for months, and Ratchet’s diagnostics started yelling frantic warnings about his intake valves, but he just ducked his head and hung on. He didn’t care even a little; he wanted out of here as much as even Starscream possibly could have.

The green mechs had been gathering on the levels above. Ratchet caught glimpses of their blank faces, and phase blasts came towards them out of dark corridors, igniting explosions out of the vaporized chemicals, but the Decepticons were all around him, their heavy armor a solid wall taking the heat, and Starscream and Thundercracker were firing back full-power blasts themselves, taking out the enemy mechs by the dozen. Megatron didn’t even slow down. They went straight up through five levels, and then the sixth seemed to go on forever—Megatron burning a tunnel through twenty solid meters of metal and concrete, heat warnings going off all through Ratchet’s armor, and suddenly they were exploding out into—into *paradise*.

Megatron kept going another twenty meters into the air just on momentum before he stopped, and the other Decepticons pulled up on his heels. They all stared around wildly. Beneath them a huge circle was glowing where they’d just broken through the ground, an incongruous fire-rimmed hole scorched out of the middle of a beautiful wide field of purple-green organic material that could almost have come straight from Earth, taller organic structures like a cross between cacti and trees dotted around harmoniously. Behind those, all around them, graceful spires of steel and light climbed up under a sky full of stars and a distant wide-ringed gas giant with a thin cloud layer drifting gently across it. Floating roads dotted with gleaming moving lights were visible in the distance in every direction, and as his audio receptors finished recalibrating, Ratchet could pick up the friendly hum of hovertraffic. If somebody had asked him to imagine a fairytale combination of a future Earth and a renewed Cybertron, this would’ve been about as close as he could’ve gotten. It was so far from the underground hell they’d just escaped that he stared down at the hole wondering if they’d hit a warp field somewhere in there.

“Where the hell *are* we?” Thundercracker said blankly.

“Wherever we are, I suggest we go *somewhere else*, at once,” Starscream said with an edge in his voice. The sound of the hovertraffic was dying off, and a rumble of distant engines was coming in



their direction. Clearly none of the local authorities had expected them to make it up this high, this fast, but a response was on the way now.

“Soundwave, suggestions,” Megatron said.

“Preliminary scanning indicates communication density significantly lower to the northwest,” Soundwave said.

“Lead the way,” Megatron said, and Soundwave motioned Buzzsaw and Laserbeak to shoot on ahead, the two of them vanishing off. “The rest of you, stealth mode, and radio silence except to warn of imminent attack. Starscream, take point. I’ll bring up the rear.”

#

It was four hours before Megatron finally got satisfied that they’d lost the pursuit and called a halt. The spires of the sprawling city had gradually shrunk away beneath them like melting ice formations and the roads had flowed into one another like rivers, leaving vast green spaces beneath full of vegetation and animal life that climbed abruptly into tall mountains of solid rock laced through with metals: good density for scattering signals. Laserbeak spotted a big cavern halfway up in one of them and circled back to lead them silently to it.

Ratchet winced as Scrapper finally set him down inside: Autobot frames weren’t designed to be sailing through the air for hours at a time. “Thanks,” he said anyway, and meant it, although Scrapper ignored it and limped over to a wall and sank down without talking. Everyone else around them was doing the same, groaning more or less. Ratchet loosened up his joints and servos with a quick lubricating routine, and then he went and got Wheeljack where Skywarp had dumped him near the mouth of the cave. Megatron was standing there surveying the dark landscape; Ratchet took a shot and said to him, “I could use a corner to work on Wheeljack and Hook.”

Megatron glanced down at him and then turned his head. “Clear out the deepest alcove,” he ordered, and the Decepticons grumbled a bit but shuffled themselves around, making room. Ironhide stumped over and got Wheeljack’s feet, and they carried him back together. Long Haul brought Hook over too and then stood over him with arms folded, watchfully.

“Any of you have some spare coronid alloy?” Ratchet asked him. “I can patch his shoulder with the mercurium I carry, but it won’t bind to the rest of his frame evenly. I’m pretty sure it won’t hold through more than five transformations.”

Long Haul only scowled, but Megatron’s voice floated back from the cave mouth. “Mixmaster,” was all he said, but Mixmaster groaned faintly—he’d been lugging Ironhide the whole way, so he had even more right than the rest of them to be tired—and after a moment he transformed and rolled into the center of the cave and muttered, “All right, come on, load me up, I *know* you’ve got spare panels.” Turned out most of the Decepticons were carrying at least a couple of spare chunks of armor plating, or had double layers, and several of them more or less grudgingly tossed the extras in. Mixmaster churned through it and pumped out three sheets of clean alloy.

Ratchet had seized the time meanwhile and gotten to work on Wheeljack’s poor obliterated servo. The mercurium bound just fine to Wheeljack’s frame, which had more carbon than the Decepticons liked to use in their designs, and by the time Mixmaster was finished, the first three layers were down, and they could stand to set for a while anyway. Ratchet switched over to working on Hook as soon as Mixmaster was done. He normally preferred to work in sequence rather than parallel when he had stable patients, to keep focused, but he didn’t want to give Megatron a chance to *order* him to fix Hook first, which would give Ironhide a reason to plant *his* heels. There was going to be trouble sooner or later, that wasn’t in question, but under the circumstances, Ratchet was in favor of making

it *later*.

It took a good five hours of work switching back and forth to get them both patched up, and when he finally finished and straightened up to stretch his over-extended back servos, nobody else was even up, all of them sunk deep into rest or defrag cycles. The sun was rising on the other side of the mountains, pale blue-white and looking roughly the size of Earth's sun, probably a supergiant a long way off. Only Megatron was still on his feet, standing at the entrance watching it come up.

He glanced back as Ratchet came over to him. "Well?"

"They'll be all right. I want the new work to settle for a bit, let their self-repair systems integrate it. I'll boot them up for a test run in a few hours."

Megatron nodded. "Will Hook be able to combine?"

Ratchet shook his head. "He'd be the best one to answer that question, but I'd be leery. It's nowhere near factory strength work, and his frame takes a lot of the strain of Devastator's head. Emergencies only."

"Devastator is rarely called for in any other circumstance," Megatron said dryly. He looked back out frowning over the landscape.

"Fair enough," Ratchet said. He looked at Megatron and figured, what the hell; it wasn't like Megatron hadn't had time to think about it. "If you don't mind my asking," he started.

Megatron snorted. "Never fear, Autobot. You are all perfectly safe with us." He turned his glowing red eyes on Ratchet. "I'm going to need all of you to trade back to Prime in exchange for whatever he was *actually* doing while the lot of you lured us away. Care to enlighten me, by the way?"

"Not really," Ratchet said, grimly. Damn.

Megatron waved a hand negligently. "It can wait until after we've arranged a transport. I'm sure Soundwave will find a way to encourage you all to be more communicative on the way back to Cybertron."

"Great," Ratchet said. It came out a little too sincere: he definitely wasn't looking forward to having any more intimate interactions with Soundwave, but he'd almost be willing to trade it for passage off this horrible planet. "Speaking of which, I don't suppose you have any ideas about *how* to arrange that transport? The folks here don't seem all that friendly so far."

He meant to say it lightly, but his audio subprocessor added a little involuntary feedback as his near-term memory modules served up a vivid sensory image of the blank-faced mechs, falling away slugged. Ratchet looked away, his jaw servos rotating. *Why?* His processor started hauling the awful questions back up again. *Whywhywhy—*

"I wasn't planning to ask nicely," Megatron said, interrupting the loop. He jerked his chin skyward where the stars were fading out. "There are more than a hundred satellites in orbit, and I've seen three warp signatures going to and from the moons of that gas giant—mining ships, I would imagine. They have space-capable transport. In the morning we'll do some reconnaissance, locate a suitable ship, and take it."

"You think they'll have a transport in our size?" Ratchet said. Megatron frowned at him. "There were walking paths in that garden, the one we came out into. They looked roughly Earth-human scale to me. Same thing with the spacing of the windows on the buildings. A little bit bigger, but definitely not Cybertronian. I wouldn't bet on a ship here being built to take us."

Megatron kept frowning. “Those weren’t mindless drones down there. They weren’t as effective as Decepticon warriors, but they reacted too quickly to be anything other than true cybernetic lifeforms.”

A hard shudder tried to roll through Ratchet’s body, joints tightening like he was going to take off running, except there was nowhere to go. “Yeah. They were sentient.”

Megatron was silent. Then he said softly, very cold, “Sentient, but—*tractable*.”

Ratchet fought down another shudder, wrapping his arms around himself. Tractable, obedient robots below, serving their masters above. It sounded horribly right. Maybe that was why they’d kept coming like that. Because *intractable* mechs—ended up in that recycling room. Hell, he would’ve taken dying at the end of Megatron’s cannon himself over being cut apart alive.

It also explained why they’d all been tossed down there without hesitation. A ship built for mechs alone meant of course the mechs on board were *intractable*.

Megatron was glaring out at the mountains again. After a moment he said, “Then we will locate *your* ship, and repair it. Do you have any means of tracking it?”

“Actually, yeah,” Ratchet said slowly, “it should have started emitting a distress signal as soon as it entered atmosphere. Those are meant to be picked up by high powered long-range scanners, but I’m betting Soundwave could catch it if he tunes to Autobot frequencies.”

Megatron nodded. “We will begin the search in the morning,” he said with finality. “Now go and rest. You will have more work tomorrow.”

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ratchet said. He could’ve gladly gone for six complete defrag cycles in a row. He hesitated and half turned back. “Are *you* all right?” he asked abruptly.

Megatron glanced back, one eye ridge raised. “Concerned?” he said mockingly.

“I sure am,” Ratchet said. “Because frankly, I’ll take getting off this planet as your hostage over being down in that pit any day of a Cybertronian decade. And I wouldn’t lay odds on any of us getting out of here without you.”

“Starscream would be deeply wounded at your estimation of his leadership skills,” Megatron said. He actually sounded amused. “Save your fretting. I am functioning within acceptable parameters. When that changes, I’ll keep your adequate motivation in mind.”

“Fine by me,” Ratchet said, and went to the back of the chamber, lay down in the space open between Brawn and Ironhide, and let his consciousness sink straight offline.

#

“I’ve had better millennia,” Wheeljack said with a groan when Ratchet got him up the next morning. He limped around in a few small circles and then lay back down, panting: a good sign. Meant his self-repair networks were kicking into high gear and his systems were pulling in fresh air to flush extra exhaust.

“You’ll do,” Ratchet said, patting him on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” Wheeljack said. “Right up until the Decepticons decide to disassemble us themselves. Has he figured out our ‘mission’ yet?” He jerked his chin towards Megatron.

Ratchet sighed. “Yep. They’re saving us for hostages.”

“You sure we’re not better off making a break for it?” Wheeljack peered around. “Doesn’t look like they’re keeping a close watch.”

“I’m sure,” Ratchet said, flatly. “Trust me, Wheeljack. We don’t want to spend one microsecond longer on this planet than we have to.”

He went to check on Bumblebee, who was rapidly improving per the usual: he was small but efficient, and his self-repair systems were second to none. Good, too, given how much of a beating he tended to go in for. Hook was as all right as Ratchet was going to get him; when roused, he’d glared like he was offended Ratchet hadn’t woken him up from the start to repair himself and had done a thorough self-inspection before sniffing and stomping back off to the other Constructicons without a word.

There was plenty of work left after that: a lot of the Decepticons had taken dings here or there, or gotten some circuits fried. And Megatron wanted the Constructicons working on making the cave defensible and digging out a couple of escape routes, which left Ratchet to do the repairs. He didn’t mind; it was good to have something to occupy his thoughts instead of just sitting around while Soundwave stood there in the corner silently scanning the planetary airwaves. But damn, the Decepticons really were a surly bunch; none of them so much as said thanks, and most of them watched him with hard suspicion the whole time he was working on them, like maybe he’d stick a micromine inside their chests if they gave him the chance. After he finished doing follow-up work on Thundercracker’s memory unit to make sure it didn’t pop out again, Thundercracker slammed his back cranial plate shut so fast it nearly caught Ratchet’s fingers, and he jumped up and stalked away right off.

“You know, I don’t *bite*,” Ratchet said to his retreating back, shaking his head.

“We *do*,” Starscream snapped: he’d been alternating between bursts of pacing the narrow confines of the cave and coming back to hover sullenly over Ratchet’s work. “The only reason you’re still functioning is because Megatron wills it. Keep that in mind, Autobot.”

Ratchet sighed. “How could I forget with all these helpful reminders. Is there a reason you’re trying to wear out the floor, or is that subroutine stuck?”

Starscream’s eyes narrowed angrily. “What subroutine?”

“The crisis subroutine I’m guessing you’ve been running since we were down there last night?” Ratchet said. Starscream still looked somewhere between suspicious and blank. “Huh, guess it operates on a completely subconscious layer. It’s probably designed for short-term bursts, but yesterday it kept looping long enough that now it’s bumping over the exit condition. Sit down, it’ll take me a second with a transistor lancet.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Starscream snapped.

“Uh,” Ratchet said, “you did notice everyone else on the belt couldn’t even get scared?”

Starscream’s eyes went neon. “I was not *scared*,” he hissed. “I was *attempting* to rouse the rest of you to *deal with a threat*.”

Actually, he’d been screaming for Megatron like a day-old mech with an instruction set hangup, but Ratchet didn’t think that would be tactful to bring up. “Starscream,” he said, “as far as I know, your flying precision is miles beyond any other mech out there, and you’re also heavily armored and your

weaponry is top-notch.”

Starscream folded his arms and sniffed. “You noticed,” he sneered, but for all that, he clearly liked hearing it, even from an Autobot. “So?”

Ratchet suppressed a sigh. “So your risk-evaluation network is trained extremely low, because when you take risks, they pay off. In other words, you *don’t* get scared normally. But getting scared when you’re about to die is *healthy*. So you’ve clearly got a compensatory subroutine that kicks in on those rare occasions when you end up in a situation that’s not just high-risk but actually deadly. It overrides your normal emotional routines and *forces* you into a fear state, because otherwise you’d—I don’t know, try to pick a fight with Omega Supreme or fly into a supernova. I’m not knocking it; yesterday it saved all our lives. But *now* it’s probably making you feel like your head’s about to explode for no reason, so let me kick it.”

Starscream scowled some more, but he did sit down. Sure enough, one tiny zap from the lancet and the subroutine dropped out, and literally all his diagnostics levels came way down instantly: he’d been operating on ultra high alert the whole time. “Better?”

“I was fine before,” Starscream said coldly, standing up and shutting the access vent. “I was only humoring you.”

Ratchet sighed and put away the lancet. “You’re welcome.”

He nearly fell over as Starscream shoved into his face, his eyes glittering hot again. “Stop expecting us to *thank* you,” he hissed. “If it weren’t for us, all of you would have been taken apart into your components down there. But then you Autobots have always been happy to get behind the nearest Decepticon as soon as real danger shows up—and just as happy to stick a vibroblade through our back armor whenever we stop being useful. You’d be delighted if *we* behaved like those *tractables* down there.”

Ratchet shot to his feet, so angry it took over his entire processor; he could barely keep his intake valves running. “Go to *hell*, Starscream. Before you Decepticons turned Cybertron into a war zone, I used to repair ten of you for every Autobot who came through my doors.”

“Really?” Starscream sneered. “Strange, since most hospitals wouldn’t *let* us in the doors. Where *was* your practice, exactly? Some back alley in Polyhex?”

“The neurotrauma ward in Iacon Central,” Ratchet snapped. “And we never shut our doors to Decepticons. Not until *you* shut them for *everyone*.”

“Oh, my,” Starscream said, in mock sympathy. “Was that the one right across the plaza from the Spire of Progress? And you were an actual neurotrauma specialist? Remarkable. It must have been quite the come-down, descending to a mere field medic. How sad you must have been.”

“I’m not *sad* to be a field medic!” Ratchet said. “I’m *sad* that I spent six weeks on my hands and knees digging corpses out of the rubble you left behind after you bombed the hell out of the Spire. I’m *sad* that there’s no hospitals left on Cybertron. I’m *sad* that our whole damn planet is a burned-out husk. Was it *worth* it? Anything you thought you were fighting for, was it *worth* the ruin you’ve made?”

He was shouting up into Starscream’s face by the end of it. Ratchet’s processor was trying to inform him this was a very bad idea, but he couldn’t stop it; he kept getting flashes of the mechs’ blank faces all around, cutting in with the dead blank faces he’d dug out of the twisted ruins of the Spire, and sorrow and rage were tying up every primary channel he had. Starscream had actually backed up a

step out of surprise at first, but his eyes narrowed almost immediately, and his hand clenched into a fist. But it didn't get a chance to fly.

"Yes," Megatron said flatly, and Ratchet jerked his head round just as Starscream did. Megatron had come up to them; he looked down at Ratchet, his face cold and brutal. "Yes," he said again. "It was worth it. No matter the cost." He turned to Starscream. "Soundwave has located the Autobot ship. Take him and the Seekers and run a decoy raid in the vicinity: I want the authorities distracted while Laserbeak and Buzzsaw run a complete scan of the ship and identify any damage. If you can find more energon, all the better." He turned back. "Ironhide! Choose one of your people to go with Laserbeak and Buzzsaw in case they need access codes for any portions of the ship. Soundwave, have Ravage go with them to patrol." He turned away, and Starscream went for Skywarp and Thundercracker.

"I'll go," Bumblebee said quickly, stepping up.

"*I'll* go," Brawn said. "You came off that ship with half your internals dripping."

"Doc's given me a clean bill of health," Bumblebee said. "Ironhide, I'm the right one to go. It's going to be bad news if it turns into a fight, but it'll be bad news for anyone who goes. We're going to want to get in and get out quiet and fast."

Ironhide glanced over, checking; Ratchet had to run three full air-exhaust cycles before he let himself open his mouth again. "Bumblebee's okay."

"All right, Bumblebee, roll out," Ironhide said. "An' watch your back out there. Don't let those Deceptibirds see you enter the codes."

He came over to Ratchet's side after they'd gone and put a hand on his shoulder. "Here I thought *I* was the one who was gonna have to bite his tongue to keep from pickin' a fight."

"Yeah, well," Ratchet said tightly, packing up his tools. "I'm full of surprises."

"Don't let the 'cons get to you, doc," Ironhide said. "Our job is to get out of here, and then find a way to cut those tin cans off our tails and get back to Optimus and the others. Keep your head down 'til then."

Ratchet nodded a little. He knew Ironhide was right, he knew better. There wasn't any point expecting Decepticons to be sorry for anything they'd blown to pieces. Just—Starscream wasn't all wrong. Ratchet *had* been happy for that wall of Decepticon might yesterday. And he'd also been glad to patch them up today. It felt good, felt natural. Autobots and Decepticons had been designed to work together, to complement each other. But that wasn't *good enough* for the Decepticons. Starscream had some nerve, talking about Autobots wanting Decepticon slaves. They were the ones who'd started tearing the whole planet apart just so they could rule it.

Megatron was standing at the mouth of the cave again, unmoving, his shadow stretching deep into the cave. He'd raised an army, killed two Primes, conquered the entire planet—all that ferocious drive, his brilliance, his sheer power. What he could've done if he hadn't pointed himself at all of Cybertron like a weapon. Ratchet sighed and put the last of the tools away inside his casing, his anger loop hitting exit conditions and dropping out of main memory as fast as it had come. He just hated the whole damn war so much. Surly as Decepticons were, he'd rather work on them than patch up Autobots who weren't made for fighting, who whispered to him about being afraid to run a defrag cycle because they didn't want to have to live battles a second time over, knowing he was sending them right back out into the crap they weren't meant for. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. But they were a long way off from how things were supposed to be, and not much

chance of getting there any time soon.

#

An event monitor subroutine nudged Ratchet out of the rest cycle he'd put himself in, and he sat up: Skywarp was standing at the mouth of the cave, giving Megatron a report; Megatron was frowning, and Ironhide was standing next to him, fists clenched. The rest of the Seekers weren't back yet. "What happened?" Ratchet asked Wheeljack, low. "The ship okay?"

"There was a patrol parked inside the ship," Wheeljack said grimly. "They were in some weird low-power state, so the birds didn't pick them up, and they got Bumblebee and Ravage. Come on, give me a shot of lubricant and make this servo settle down quicker. I'm not sitting this one out."

Ratchet didn't argue with him, just opened the upper thigh panel and rerouted lubricant and power flow to give the new servo a boost. "It'll hurt, but it won't dump you on your feet," he said. Wheeljack nodded, and then Laserbeak was winging back in with Starscream and Thundercracker and Soundwave right after; Soundwave landed and instantly opened his chest compartment. Laserbeak slotted in and they started projecting a zoomed-in video: a troop of the green mechs marching Bumblebee and Ravage away through what looked like an industrial zone, big blank warehouses instead of beautiful spires, and the video followed them to a huge circular plate in the ground.

There was another mech being dragged up to it ahead of them, a mech who was yelling and screaming, "Don't! Don't do this! Please!" They implacably took him to the edge of the plate, and pushed a button: it slid open, revealing a massive dark chute going straight down. "No!" the mech screamed once more, and then they shoved him in without hesitation.

They didn't bother closing the chute cover again. Bumblebee and Ravage were both fighting as hard as they could to get loose, but there were just too many of the mechs. They were dragged up to the edge, and hurled inside, vanishing.

The video ended. Megatron's face was hard as stone. "How far down does that shaft go?"

"Analysis indicates depth comparable to the previous facility," Soundwave said.

"We're not leaving Bumblebee down there!" Ironhide said.

Megatron ignored him. "Did you obtain more energon?" he asked Starscream.

"See for yourself," Starscream said smugly, gesturing: the other Seekers put down a dozen brilliantly glowing energon cubes. "Three hundred sixty astroliters of triple-refined energon. There's more where that came from as well."

Megatron's eyes glowed, approving. "Good. All of you, fuel up. We're going after them. Will the nanites be an issue again?"

"Blocking feasible within ten meter range," Soundwave said.

"We shouldn't need to," Ratchet said. "The nanites are fairly basic—they're not allowed to evolve. Our self-repair systems are smart enough to identify them as threats now that we've been exposed once. I'll broadcast a short booster routine you can upload if you want just to be safe."

While he sent it out, he also quickly recharged all his tools to full power—funny not to have to even think about his ration—and checked his supplies: there was still some of the coronid alloy, so he packed it in with the rest of his materials. He was trying not to think about what they were about to

do. He could easily name about fifty-six billion things he wanted to do more than jump back down into another pit like the one they'd just fought their way out of. But leaving Bumblebee down in that same pit ranked even lower on the list.

The one thing he could say for the experience was that going down was a lot easier than going up. Megatron blasted the shaft cover open with a single shot, and they flew into it. "Hey, we should keep an eye out," Ratchet called; Wheeljack had hacked together magnetized handholds for the Autobots, and they were all sliding down the walls about as fast as the Cons were flying. "It didn't look like they expected a lot of fight on the other end of this shaft even after throwing in conscious mechs, and it takes at least ten minutes before nanite infection takes hold, even in big doses. There could be disruptor fire on the way down."

"Scanning for matching energy readings," Soundwave said, and turned on a broad-spectrum infrared projector that made massive batteries of disruptor units on the sides of the shaft glow faintly red, down below.

"We'll take care of those," Starscream said, and he and the Seekers accelerated and started pinpoint-blasting the disruptors like they were running target practice. The bottom of the shaft was full of what looked like automated equipment meant to load mechs onto the conveyor belts, but the Seekers smashed through the central hub feet-first, transforming as they landed, and started blasting away at the walls of the shaft in all directions: by the time the rest of them got there, all the equipment had been reduced to smoking ruin. There was only one problem: the conveyor belt system itself plunged through nine different openings leading away in different directions.

"An' if we take too long to find 'em, we're gonna have company. We'll have to split up," Ironhide said.

"You and Brawn, take the three to the north," Megatron said. "Soundwave, go with them. Starscream, you and the Seekers take those three. Constructicons, remain here and keep our escape route clear. You two, with me," he added, to Ratchet and Wheeljack, and turned and blasted a smoking hole through the last three openings, widening the space so he could duck into it.

"This is great," Wheeljack muttered, going through the hole behind him. "Really. I've always wanted to follow Megatron into certain danger, trusting him to save my friends and watch my back. Oh, wait, *no I haven't*."

"You got any better ideas?" Ratchet said.

"Yeah, how about sticking with *Ironhide*," Wheeljack said.

"Ironhide and Brawn are competent fighters," Megatron said over his shoulder. "The two of you are not. In a combat situation, you would be a liability to them, and therefore to the overall mission."

"How are we not a liability to you, then?" Wheeljack said.

Megatron snorted and blew a massive hole through the next wall ahead instead of answering. The alarms were going off all around again, yelling about intractables. It made all the servos in Ratchet's back tighten up. Those mechs were going to show up soon. He kept scanning for any sign of an Autobot signature, a Cybertronian life form. "Megatron," he said, as it occurred to him. "I'm no Soundwave, but my sensors are designed to amplify faint or incomplete distress signals. If you puncture some more of these walls, I might get a peep."

Megatron casually started blasting holes in all the walls on either side of them as they walked. Ratchet kept straining every sensor, nothing coming through. "Nothing," he muttered, just as



Megatron tore open another wall around the conveyor belt—only to find it dumping into a small narrow smelting pit, nothing that even Ravage would fit into; this one was probably just for random mechanical junk, not mechs.

Megatron turned round and headed back the way they'd come without a word, shouldering past them. He moved damn fast for such a big mech. They had to trot to keep up, and then as they passed one of the punctured walls, a ping came through. Ratchet skidded to a halt and went back for another look: the hole was big enough for him to scramble through. He called, "Hang on, I might be getting something!" and ducked inside. "Bumblebee?" he shouted, broadcasting on every Autobot wavelength at the same time. Wheeljack had come in behind him; he was sweeping around with his floodlight.

It shone on rows and rows of shelves, loaded up with small components, stacked in bins from floor to ceiling. "What is this, a warehouse? Hey, look at this," Wheeljack said, darting forward to grab one out of a bin. He showed Ratchet. "Spare parts, factory-fresh. This is going to be a perfect replacement for my hip servo. Let me take a quick look, maybe I can find one for Hook's shoulder \_\_\_"

He turned back to dig into another bin, and Ratchet got another ping, from further in—the signal was clearer, and it wasn't Autobot; it was almost as generic as a signal could get. But maybe if their motivators had gotten blocked again—Ratchet pushed between two racks and tracked the signal—to a bin. He frowned and dug inside and got the source out: it was just an individual signal unit with a small power supply of its own, so it could keep going even if the mech it was attached to had run out of power, but Ratchet couldn't see how it had gotten set off in the first place. This kind of unit didn't actually have a switch, it was used as part of a signal array, and it only got set off when it was part of the—

He dropped it back into the bin with a clatter and backed out again, so fast he banged over one of the racks with a crash. Wheeljack looked puzzled over at him, his hands full of clean, polished spare parts. Just as good as new. "Put them back," Ratchet managed to say. He felt like he needed to purge his fuel lines. "Put them all back."

Wheeljack stared at him, uncertain, but then he turned to put back the parts. He was about to set the hip servo back on the shelf when a huge black hand closed over his, keeping the part inside.

"No," Megatron said. "Keep them, and whatever other components we might be able to use." He looked at Ratchet. "They are already dead. And they will not be better served by leaving their parts here, to be put into tractables. Come."

He wasn't wrong. But Ratchet still felt queasy, stumbling back out into the corridor after him. Wheeljack looked a bit sick, too. "Those—you think *all* of those—came from—" he said to Ratchet.

"Let's not talk about it," Ratchet said. He was thinking about it anyway. The racks and racks, the bins all full, the room stretching away into the dark. And this—this wasn't even the only *recycling level* on the planet. It was the second one they'd seen. Whoever these people were, they wanted cybernetic intelligence at their service, and they had so much power to spare, they just trashed any mech who even looked at their masters sideways, ripped them apart to make new ones. They probably did it pretty often, since they had chutes going up to the surface to make it easier.

Megatron's radio crackled to life ahead of them. "*Megatron. Ravage and Autobot prisoner located. Position under fire by hostile mechs.*"

"I'm coming!" Megatron snapped, and went pounding full speed down the hall. Ratchet and Wheeljack ran after him, but he was out of sight by the time they got back out into the central shaft.

They ended up getting stopped there by fire from above, enemy drones dropping bombs in on them. The Constructicons were welding together protective plates as fast as they could, but the bombs were getting bigger, bringing more debris in on them. They were going to end up buried alive.

“We need Devastator!” Scrapper was yelling at Hook.

“You can’t have him! My shoulder’s patched with folding metal and circuitry wire!” Hook screamed back. “If we try to combine, the joint will give, and then my frame will shred down the fracture line! No!”

“Give me the shoulder joint,” Ratchet said to Wheeljack, who handed it over.

“I’m going to see if I can back up their shielding with a forcefield,” Wheeljack said.

Ratchet nodded and ran over to Hook and showed him the joint. “We found a spare. Lie down.”

“What? Is it solid? Where did you even—” Hook began, suspiciously, but Scrapper grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him flat to the ground as he yelped.

“Not *now*!” Scrapper snarled. “Get it in!”

It needed a couple layers welded on for a perfect fit, but the spare alloy Ratchet had brought along worked for that like a charm. It took less than five astrominutes. He accelerated the cooling with ten quick sprays of liquid nitrogen, adjusted to avoid damaging the tensile strength, and slammed the shoulder panel shut. “All set!” he said.

Scrapper immediately thrust him back against the wall of the shaft and shouted, “Constructicons, *transform and unite!*”

Being in a narrow shaft with Devastator was really not Ratchet’s idea of a good time, and still less when Devastator roared in fury and blasted off for the surface to tear into the aerial attackers. A massive panel of metal sheared off the interior wall as he passed and came flying down. Ratchet dived for cover under some other debris just as the huge sheet slammed into the ground, the dust and roar of destruction so obliterating that he lost thirty-nine astroseconds of sensory input, and spent another twenty-three trying to go see if Wheeljack was okay before he realized that the reason he couldn’t do that was that *he* wasn’t okay: a steel rod had been shoved all the way through his lower leg and was pinning him to the ground.

The slab was pressing down on him from overhead; he couldn’t get enough room to reach the rod and slice himself loose. Ratchet tried to push it off, but it started sinking instead. “Wheeljack?” he called, hoarsely; all his intakes were clogged with dust.

The floodlights suddenly poured back in, blinding: Thundercracker had just ripped the slab off him. Ratchet swallowed a yell as the rod dragged out with it. He sat up and grabbed his leg instinctively in a flinch of pain, but the damage wasn’t severe: it was ugly, but it wasn’t going to kill him. “Decepticons, move out!” Megatron was shouting.

Thundercracker grabbed him and launched, and Ratchet twisted his head around midair trying to see—Bumblebee, Ironhide—Thundercracker was moving too fast for his optics to compensate, but he caught a glimpse of a big smear of yellow off to one side also moving at similar speed, and he faintly heard Ironhide yelling below, “No, I *ain’t* leaving him,” the sound having trouble catching up as Thundercracker accelerated, and then they were bursting out past Devastator, who was standing astride the shaft and bellowing fury as he smashed one attacking aircraft after another.

He thought that was the worst of it, but as soon as they got into the aerial region Devastator’s arms

had cleared, Thundercracker *threw* him into the air. The whole world spun crazily and then started to move towards him very fast, and Ratchet couldn't help a squawk as he went flailing towards the ground, until he was yanked up short as two grappling hooks came swooping under his arms. He grabbed at them wildly and was being towed: Thundercracker had transformed and was hauling him along at what almost immediately became a truly terrifying speed. Ratchet clung on to the cables trying to convince his internal diagnostics that no, he *hadn't* taken contaminated energon, and he didn't need to purge fuel right now.

He was devoutly grateful when he got dumped back on the floor of the cave. "Cybertron, my head feels like it's going to pop open," Wheeljack groaned as Skywarp dropped him next to Ratchet. "Next time how about *not* being dragged through the air at supersonic speeds."

"Sounds good to me," Ratchet said. He would've liked to just shut down for a while, but the others would be coming in any second with fresh injuries, so he slapped a patch onto his own leg, then staggered to his feet and gave himself a shot of lubricant thinner to get his system moving and started laying out his tools.

Starscream flew literally right into the mouth of the cave before he transformed—with about four micrometers to spare from scraping his wings, so his standard risk-evaluation routines were clearly back in full force—and tossed Ironhide along the floor like a bowling ball, definite malice involved. But Ironhide had an overall body density roughly that of a solid block of titanium, so he just uncurled and stood up at the end of it and glared at Starscream before stumping over to Ratchet. He had a smaller mech strapped protectively to his front, a stranger—as Ironhide slung him off, Ratchet realized it was the other mech from the video, the one Laserbeak had seen getting thrown into the shaft.

The stranger wasn't one of the green-armored mechs; based on the reinforced struts, Ratchet was willing to guess he was designed for transport work, loading and unloading cargo. He was out, but he didn't actually look damaged—oh, hell; he'd switched *himself* off, Ratchet realized, his fuel pump clenching for a moment. So he wouldn't have to feel it while—

"Everybody accounted for?" Ironhide asked, helping Ratchet get the mech stretched out on the floor.

"I haven't seen Bumblebee," Ratchet said.

"Well, we got him out, anyway. The three of them were about fifteen astroseconds from gettin' their heads scrambled, but we made it," Ironhide said, and looked around as the Constructicons came flying in, with Megatron and Soundwave on their heels. Soundwave set down Brawn, and Megatron tossed Bumblebee in negligently: he'd been carrying him with one finger hooked through the neck cavity, like the way the cat Spike had brought into the Ark had carried her kittens around.

"Thanks lots," Bumblebee muttered, picking himself up. Megatron didn't so much as glance at him; he came straight back and stood over the unconscious mech, his eyes narrowed.

"What is his condition?" he demanded.

"He's fine, far as I can tell," Ratchet said. "Just needs his bootup sequence triggered. He shut down so he wouldn't—"

Megatron was already turning away to Soundwave. "If we start him functioning again, can you block him from making any transmissions?"

"Affirmative," Soundwave said.

“Hang on,” Wheeljack said, “I’d worry about passive systems, not active. This mech wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about where he was going. I’d bet on some kind of system he wouldn’t be able to control at all—better yet, something that doesn’t rely on power or signal at all. Something he couldn’t rip out, or block by hiding—”

Hook and Scrapper had come over. “Exterior composition,” Scrapper said instantly. “I’ve thought of doing something of the sort for transport containers—stripe the cladding with varying amounts of a neutrino-scan-visible material for tracking, even underground. Megatron, if that’s the method they’ve used, we don’t have enough appropriate materials to block it. They’ll be able to locate him with satellite scanners, and they’re certainly sweeping for us already. We’ve got to dispose of him at once. Ideally, by melting him down.”

“Hey!” Ratchet stood up. “How about we *don’t* jump to slagging one of my patients!”

Hook stared at him as if he was insane. “What melodramatic nonsense. You’ve never even spoken to him!”

“He’s *on my table*, he’s *my patient*!” Ratchet said.

“Enough,” Megatron said. “Offer me a rational alternative, or shut up.”

Great, that wasn’t pressure or anything. “Fine, how about this: destroying him is *stupid*,” Ratchet said. “We still don’t know basically anything about this planet, we’ve nearly been taken down twice already, and now they know for sure we’ll be trying for the *Excelsior*, which means they’re going to be waiting for us there with everything they’ve got. We need intel, and he’s probably got it.” Megatron’s face didn’t change, but he kept listening, at least. “And we don’t need to cover him head to toe with palladium sheathing. We just need to make sure he doesn’t match the pattern they’re scanning for.”

“Well?” Megatron said to Scrapper.

“We’d have to isolate the material they used... but I suppose Mixmaster could analyze a panel of his frame,” Scrapper said grudgingly. “We *could* disguise him...”

“Except then they will find a pattern here that doesn’t match *anything* in their database,” Hook said.

“Yeah, but they can’t have a negative-match process,” Wheeljack put in. “They’re not energy-bound, right? They’re materials-bound. That’s why they—*recycle* instead of smelt down. Any one of their mechs is probably carrying a dozen old parts, and you’d get a negative match any place two patterns overlap. They probably just make sure each new mech gets at least some parts in a unique pattern, and that’s what they’ll be looking for.”

Ratchet didn’t wait for any further discussion; he dropped to the ground and pried off an unimportant arm panel and held it out. Scrapper scowled down at it, but after a moment he took it and tossed it to Mixmaster.

“Boot him up,” Megatron said. “Soundwave will lead interrogation.”

Ratchet sat back on his heels and glared up at him. “Do you always have to go straight for the hostile solution? Why wouldn’t he want to help us? They nearly *vivisected* him.”

“And he was frantically begging them for his life before they threw him in,” Megatron said. “You’re the one who pointed out we need intel, Autobot. And you’re correct, which is why we’re going to take a significant risk to get some. I don’t intend to take more of one than necessary. Now *boot him up*, unless you *do* want me to slag him and throw the remains off this mountain.”

Ratchet ran a quick lubrication routine through his jaw servos to keep them from opening with one of the many remarks he still wanted to make, then started the boot process going. Once he saw it was going into what looked clearly like a set of standard boot-up checks, he looked up. “Can we at least *try* just asking him questions first before you have Soundwave start inserting low-level subroutines into a possibly incompatible mech’s brain?”

“By all means,” Megatron said. “Ask him anything you like. And then Soundwave will make certain he wasn’t lying about it.”

Ratchet was trying to think of something else to try when the mech came online and sat up with a gasp, looking around wildly. “Hey, easy there,” Ratchet said, putting his hand on the mech’s chestplate. “It’s okay, you’re safe,” which he really hoped wasn’t a lie.

“What? Who, what,” the mech said, the words coming on the one-second delay, and then it dropped out as his language processor switched into an actual Cybertronian dialect; an old one, tail-end of the Golden Age old. “What did you—are you another cell? But how did you—they *shafted* me—” He started patting himself all over, running hands over his limbs like he didn’t believe he was all there.

“Whoa, slow down,” Ratchet said. “Mind giving me your designation?”

“I’m Loadedge?” He said it almost like a question.

“Okay, Loadedge,” Ratchet said. “Another cell of what?”

“Another resistance cell,” Loadedge still sounded dazed. “I’m from—” and then he cut his audio off and jerked his head up with sudden wary suspicion. “I was *shafted*,” he said after a moment. “I didn’t shut down until I was *in* the recycling level. Nobody could’ve gotten me out of there.” He barked a harsh laugh, looking Ratchet up and down. “Wow, I guess we’ve been annoying the Makers more than I thought? What did they do, mock up this whole place, set you up—well, you can forget it. I’ll dump core before I tell you anything.”

“Okay, hang on an astrosecond,” Ratchet said, holding up a hand to hold off Soundwave, who had ominously unfolded a viral injector from a fingertip panel and was inspecting it. “First off, no, we’re not another resistance cell. We crashed on this planet two days ago and woke up in one of those recycling levels. And we don’t need you to tell us anything about your operations. What we *would* like is some help getting back to our ship and off this planet.”

Loadedge was staring at him. When Ratchet finished, he said levelly, “Let me get this straight. You woke up in a recycler. And then you...blasted your way out to the surface?” When Ratchet nodded, he nodded back slowly. “Okay. But that wasn’t enough fun, so then you blasted your way *in* to *another* recycler, got me, and blasted your way back out *again*.”

“Not that we’re sorry to have rescued you, but we went in there because they caught two of us,” Ratchet said. “They got tossed into that shaft right behind you.”

“Right,” Loadedge said. “Seriously, you expect me to *believe* this?” He actually laughed out loud. “Sorry, just—blasting your way in and out of recycling levels, slaughtering whole armies of enforcers—I’m surprised you didn’t just go straight for it and tell me you’re Megatron come to liberate the entire planet.”

Ratchet stared at him. Soundwave paused. Megatron had been about to step away and leave them to it, but he turned back to stand over the mech with a quizzical look on his face. “Liberating the planet wasn’t on my agenda, no,” he said. “How precisely have you heard my designation?”

Loadedge gave another spurt of laughter. “Oh, you *are* going for it! So you’re Megatron, huh? Who else is along? Misfire? Crosscut? Wait, let me guess, you’re Soundwave?” he asked Ratchet.

“No,” Ratchet said slowly. “No, I’m Ratchet. *That’s* Soundwave.”

Soundwave had been listening to him talk with his head tilted. “Megatron,” he said, “Language processing indicates 8.6325 million years of divergence from south-central Polyhex dialect, interpersonal declension dropped. Reversal of divergence indicates original source presumed listener of significantly lower rank. Analysis: Cybertronian speech learned from a high-ranking Decepticon officer.”

“Another Decepticon warrior crashed on this planet?” Megatron said. He turned back to Loadedge. “Is he still alive?” he grated out.

Loadedge had turned his head to stare up at the two of them, his mouth hanging open. “But—” he said, feedback distorting his vocal output. “But that’s just—those are *stories*, Megatron’s not *real*—”

Megatron’s eyes started glowing incandescent, and his fusion cannon began to hum its way up. “I am *very* real,” he hissed, “and if you require further evidence, continue defying me, and you will receive it. Now *answer me*.”

Loadedge was staring down the barrel of the fusion cannon. He didn’t even look scared, just *lost*: his reality processing matrix had apparently hit its capacity to integrate the current situation into its existing context, and was breaking down. Ratchet shunted aside his own perfectly healthy risk-evaluation function and got in the way, reaching around and gripping Loadedge’s shoulders to give him tactile feedback. “Hey,” he said quietly. “Listen to *our* speech. You can’t do the same kind of analysis that Soundwave does, but your language center can tell you that we’re speaking three different dialects all related to the one you know. Do you really think these Makers of yours would think of generating three separate dialects, *and* try feeding you a story that would strain your consciousness?”

Loadedge slowly turned to stare at him. Ratchet gave his shoulders another squeeze. “We’re not lying,” he said. “And if this other Cybertronian knows Megatron, he can confirm it for you. You could set up a meeting on neutral ground, somewhere he could get away if it was a trap—”

Loadedge flinched under his hands. He looked back up at Megatron and Soundwave, and then he came back around to Ratchet and said, “You don’t...you don’t know. The Makers would know...”

“Know what?” Ratchet said.

“You’d know he can’t get away,” Loadedge said.

“My patience grows thin,” Megatron said. “*Where is he?*”

#

None of them spoke, at first. Ratchet couldn’t. His crisis module didn’t activate, because there wasn’t a *crisis*, there wasn’t really anything to be done. His whole sensory system suspended function to avoid receiving any more data while his processor kept looping uselessly over the input that had already come in, trying to generate possible interventions, and when it finally kicked out after hitting the deep threshold, he had to jerk his head aside and frantically scoop out a hollow in the packed dirt floor of the tunnel so he could purge the fuel in his active lines without having it go spilling everywhere.

Megatron was kneeling silently by the exposed face near the base of the tunnel. It was about a foot

from the dirt floor. The optics were shut down, consciousness offline.

“The foundations of the city sink a little more every year. We have to dig this tunnel out once a decade to keep his face clear,” Loadedge said. “We usually wake him for a little while then, but he doesn’t talk much anymore. I’ve heard from other mechs in the resistance that long ago he used to tell us about other cybernetic civilizations... analyze our mission plans...” He was standing a little way back, his face uncertain. “He—he only comes out of hibernation mode when you say his name.”

Megatron said softly, “Straxus.”

For a moment nothing happened. Ratchet wished nothing *would* happen, that it was already over. It was only a matter of time. The massive wrapped cables bracketing either side of Straxus’s cranial unit held bundles of more than ten million wires each, all of them carefully and delicately woven into the neural circuitry. Doing a 7000x magnification visual scan, Ratchet could see the micronites crawling over the wires, tending and repairing them. There were three more being worked inside the skullcase right now. Each one of them was stealing a little bit more of his neural capacity. Sooner or later, the threshold would be reached, and his personality would disintegrate. Could be today, could be another million years, but it would happen.

But it wasn’t going to be today. A faint pink gleam was starting behind the glass of the optic sensors. It brightened at an agonizingly slow rate—power obviously had to be routed through some torturous route to reach his frontal processors. Except—for it to be *this* slow, they’d probably extended his circuitry literally for miles, loops going through the entire walls of the city they’d built out of him. Ratchet overheard Hook making a small internal grunting noise, like he was working valves back and forth trying not to dump fuel himself. He’d seen it too.

Thundercracker was losing the fight himself further back in the tunnel, and Starscream and Skywarp were staring in paralyzed horror. Being imprisoned like this, a mile underground, for millions of years; it was probably something straight out of a Seeker’s worst nightmares.

It was almost a full minute before power built up past the consciousness threshold. “Megatron,” Straxus whispered. “*Megatron*. Is it really you?”

“Yes, old friend,” Megatron said quietly. “It is I. How did you come here?”

Straxus made a faint crackling noise, adjusting speaker volume up. “So long ago...after Tarnax...”

Megatron nodded. “You fled Cybertron. We were never able to find you.”

Straxus just ran air through his valves for a little while. “Pursuit on my tail,” he said. “Shuttle lost warp...I crashed.”

“And they captured you,” Megatron finished. “And did *this*. ” He turned his head. His own optics were brilliant in the dark. “Extract him.”

“Ah,” Hook said. “Um.” Megatron’s optics started brightening more, virulently. Hook took a step back.

“Megatron,” Ratchet said. It was hard to talk. His processor was still churning away on some subconscious level, and throwing everything off; his whole body was making false pain reports, flickers of damage and strain in joints and servos. He forced power to his central logic unit and stepped forward. Megatron turned savage, glowing eyes on him: his entire system was running hot on Ratchet’s scans, like anger had taken over all his processing power and was boosting him to battle

readiness, even though there was no one to fight. Ratchet almost envied him. Rage was so *simple*. He just couldn't get to his own. Not when there was a patient who needed him.

"It won't work. The integrity of his persona has been violated on the sub-micrometer level—" Ratchet stopped himself; this wasn't about technical details. "If we start to extract him, he'll disintegrate before we've gotten halfway. There's no way we can stop it. Not if you built me an entire top-flight neurotrauma ward straight out of the Golden Age. And if we started, then *on* the way—he'd re-experience every single one of the neural violations as we reverse them. We can't do that to him. I *won't* do that to him. You'd have to slag me before I'd even stand here and let *Hook* try."

"Do you imagine I would *hesitate*?" Megatron hissed, half rising, even though he couldn't stand at his full height in the narrow tunnel. "This is *Straxus*. He overthrew the Senate loyalists in Polyhex and held it for the Decepticons against seventeen head-on Autobot assaults. He stood at my right hand for half a million years. And these—these hydrocarbon parasites and their mindless drones have used him like a spare cog, and you expect me to *leave him like this*?"

Megatron had his cannon half-raised; his optics still fixed on him, fury pulsing vividly behind them. It should've been terrifying, but Ratchet couldn't be scared. Dying wasn't even close to the most horrible thing that was likely to happen to him in this tunnel. "No," he said. He didn't spare power to try and keep the wobble out of his vocal unit. "No, Megatron. We can't leave him like this." He took a breath. "I was a neurosurgeon for more than a million years before you were even created, and I've been the lead Autobot medic the whole damn war. I've saved the lives of more than a million mechs. And in all that time, I've—I've killed six. With my own hands, on my own table. When that was the only thing I could do for them."

The pulsing waves of rage were receding from Megatron's eyes, horribly. He understood, then, and he believed. And Ratchet couldn't even wish otherwise. He'd hit his bedrock programming, the routines in his personality core fully activated, overriding his own self-preservation baselines. "Please let me help him," he said, barely a whisper.

Megatron didn't say anything for a moment. He'd lowered his cannon. He turned his head back. Straxus had already partially drifted away; the conversation had been complex and the words hadn't been directed at him, so whatever was left of his event processor hadn't been able to keep up. "Straxus," Megatron said, and he resurfaced, his optics brightening back up. Megatron put his hand gently on his face. "Can you access their systems?"

"What?" Ratchet jerked forward. "No! The only reason his personality is still intact at all is because he's been blocking all contact as much as he can. If he starts allowing data transfer across the boundary, he'll disintegrate almost immediately—"

"Yes," Megatron said. "But he will die as a Decepticon warrior, penetrating the enemy's defenses and making them vulnerable to us." He spoke to Straxus again. "Will you?"

Straxus' optics were fixed on him. "Yes," he breathed out. "*Yes*."

Megatron nodded. "Soundwave, establish an uplink. Store whatever information Straxus can acquire: access codes, network schematics, everything."

"Understood," Soundwave said, from deeper in the tunnel.

"Megatron," Ratchet said desperately. "*Straxus*. What you're talking about—it's going to be *agony*. And not the kind that pain-routing can avoid. His core is going to fight like hell to stay intact, he can't suppress that instinct." He looked at Hook—but he wasn't getting any help there; Hook had



already backed away about as far as he could get from all of it, still terrified.

“Megatron,” Straxus whispered. Megatron looked down at him. “Megatron. The Spire...I was with you at the Spire.” He breathed in and out harshly a few times. “Avenge me. Will you...avenge me? As you did them?”

Megatron was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he said, softly. “I swear it. The rubble of their city will be your monument.”

“Good,” Straxus said. “Good.” His optics dimmed a little. “Cybertron?” he asked after a moment.

“All Cybertron stands under the Decepticon banner,” Megatron said. “The last of the Autobot resistance has fled off-world, into exile.”

He didn’t mention that Cybertron was a dead, drained husk, but Ratchet wasn’t even a little tempted to correct him. His core routines were all stalled out: they were still softly pinging his central processor with the bare-bones intervention that was all it would take, urging him to *help*, to *comfort*. But he knew comfort when he saw it, and Straxus was clearly getting the kind he actually wanted. The only thing pushing Ratchet’s processor was his *own* pain, and that wasn’t something he was going to treat at a patient’s expense.

“Uplink established,” Soundwave said.

“I am ready,” Straxus said. “Megatron...will you...stay?”

“Yes,” Megatron said. “Leave us,” he said over his shoulder. “All of you but Soundwave.”

Hook instantly beat a retreat. Starscream and Skywarp took off even faster, grabbing Thundercracker and hauling him along. Loadedge backed away down the tunnel with them.

“I should stay,” Ratchet said. “There—There’ll be at least one hundred astroseconds after the data flow gets too corrupted to—” He swallowed. “I can cut it to eight.”

“Very well,” Megatron said after a moment. “Straxus, begin.”

Straxus was screaming, the entire time. That lasted longer than Ratchet had imagined it possibly could. Straxus had to have been deliberately sacrificing parts of his core function to stave off signal degradation. Finally, the screams started to become more incoherent, the instinctive wailing of a dying core unit that had lost any sense of self, and Soundwave said, “Data flow integrity lost.”

Ratchet fell forward onto his knees by Straxus’ head; his whole body had been vibrating with every howl of pain, waiting. He already had the neural lancet out; he slid the tip straight through the poor mutilated access port, between the cables and directly into the core. He injected the infixtis to stop the core dead, a massive overkill dose; he wanted the added speed of sheer brute physical pressure behind it.

The eight astroseconds counted down like eternities in his head as the wailing died off and finally, at the mark, stopped entirely. The last lingering gleam of light faded out of Straxus’ optics as his sensory unit shut down. Ratchet drew back the lancet and sank in on himself, shaking with exhaust and vibrations.

The tunnel was silent for a long moment. Megatron was looking at Straxus’ face. “Take Ratchet and go, Soundwave,” Megatron said. “Have everyone get clear.”

Ratchet didn’t resist when Soundwave gripped his arm and hauled him up. He stumbled along with

him down the tunnel length blindly. He stayed sagging in Soundwave's grip even when Soundwave stopped outside. He heard him talking to the others, telling them to back up, but it didn't really penetrate the fog.

"Ratchet!" Ironhide was there, grabbing him: Megatron hadn't let him and Wheeljack come into the tunnel, but he'd let them stay with the rest of the Constructicons to keep the tunnel entrance clear. "Doc, you all right? What the hell d'you do to him?" he demanded of Soundwave.

"No," Ratchet managed. "It wasn't—they, Ironhide. It's not them." The last few years he'd been noodling on an emotion-purging emergency system, inspired by the way humans cried when they needed to do the same thing; he wished right now that he'd gotten it up and running already.

"What the hell," Ironhide muttered.

Wheeljack was on his other side, getting under Ratchet's arm. "Hey, buddy," he said. "Anything we can do?"

*Drop me into one of those shafts and let them take me apart*, Ratchet wanted to say. The first time he'd had to kill a patient, he'd spent six centuries drugged out of his mind in a refined-energon den. Most medics couldn't do it at all. They just kept trying things that they knew on some level wouldn't work and tortured the patient all the way to the end, or else they just ran away and let the patient finish degrading to the end in agony and confusion.

"Time: limited," Soundwave said. "Location: unacceptable. Minimum safe distance: three kilometers."

"Huh?" Scrapper said. "Three kilometers from what?"

"Distance measured from firing location," Soundwave said. "Begin withdrawal immediately."

Ratchet didn't get what Soundwave was talking about, but he went where he was led until they were all parked on a ridge about four kilometers from the tunnel mouth. It had a nice view of the night-time city. Very pretty. You could see the smooth flow of the traffic going by unbroken, no pauses anywhere; all the lights were perfectly even, no power fluctuations even across its massive sprawl. Like a single organism. When these people had first found Straxus, his Cybertronian technology, his cybernetic intelligence, had surely been miles beyond any robotics they had built themselves. So they hadn't junked *him*. They'd found a way to work around the inconvenient personality. And then they'd scanned him and learned how to build their own cybernetic life forms, for their own use, and even though they couldn't eliminate their personalities, they'd found ways to make them—*tractable*.

Ratchet shuddered all over; if he'd had anything but dregs left to purge, he would've done it again. Wheeljack's hand squeezed comfortingly on his shoulder. "You want to tell me?" Wheeljack asked softly.

He didn't, but—he did. He wanted them to know what they were looking at. "The city," he said. "It's—Straxus. They built the city control systems out of his brain."

"Sweet Cybertron," Wheeljack muttered.

"Wait," Ironhide said. "Without—*killing* him?"

"Yeah," Ratchet said. And even death hadn't ended it. Straxus's personality had been wiped out, but his actual circuits, his processors, his memory units—the city was still using them. All the beings living there, they wouldn't even have noticed a blip. Straxus hadn't even been able to cut power off to his own components.

“What are we hanging around here for?” Starscream said to Soundwave. “If they’ve got medium-range scanners on the city walls, they might pick us up.”

“Observe,” Soundwave said, and pointed.

In the distance, Ratchet saw a red flicker: Megatron was finally coming up out of the tunnel, his eyes still glowing bright enough to see through the night. He went aloft, maybe half a kilometer into the air, and the flickering vanished out of sight as he turned towards the city.

“I don’t understand, what’s he even going to do?” Starscream said. “What was Straxus talking about, in there—what happened at the Spire of Progress? I wasn’t with you yet.”

“You ’cons packed the sub-basement with explosive and blew it up right out of the middle of Iacon City, that’s what happened,” Ironhide growled.

“Statement inaccurate,” Soundwave said. “Destruction of Spire accomplished by Megatron personally.”

“Like hell it was,” Ironhide said. “I was on the road that day, saw the blast from eight kilometers off. It took out the whole damn city center.”

“Affirmative,” Soundwave said, in his flat monotone. Out in the distance, Megatron was visible again, limned with white light: there was a massive glow building up throughout his body, gleams escaping through every joint and crack of armor.

“Uh, not that this isn’t impressive, but out of curiosity, isn’t he going to run out of power before he can fire?” Wheeljack said. He had his radiation scanners activated, fixed on Megatron’s position. “At the rate he’s going, he’ll burn the last of his energon in ninety-six astroseconds, and he hasn’t even started channeling it to the cannon. In fact, it’s all flowing into internals.”

“Negative,” Soundwave said. “Access to power being established.”

“Are you kidding me?” Wheeljack said, flipping down his scanners to look at him. “He’s already got a micro fusion reactor built-in! What bigger power source is he planning to link up to, a black hole?”

A low-power targeting beam suddenly shot out of Megatron’s cannon: thin as a filament wire, glowing red. It hit directly at the base of the city wall and into the ground. He was hanging there, suspended, the glow going so painfully bright he was in a strange island of daylight.

Soundwave didn’t look around, but he answered Wheeljack. “Affirmative.”

“Wait, what?” Wheeljack said, except the end of the sentence went strange and twisted and slow. Megatron’s shape suddenly distorted, and the view of the city around him as well, light bulging and twisting like a funhouse mirror. It lasted for a tiny fraction of an astrosecond, and then it went away, and the whole city—blew up.

The shockwave hit them thirteen astroseconds after the stunning nova-bright light, knocking them all backwards tumbling, and the howling roar followed right on its heels, a sound like the whole world ripping itself to pieces. Dimly Ratchet felt Ironhide grab him and cover him with his own body. His consciousness was stuck deep in his own memory unit: he’d been on his way *out* of Iacon that morning, after a three-day stint in the neurotrauma wards dealing with victims of a distant Decepticon raid. The war had still been something far away, nothing touching Iacon’s golden towers yet. The shockwave had knocked him off the highway; he’d flipped over the edge and wound up dazed on his back while the roaring hit him. He’d thought an asteroid had hit the planet.

The blast wave passed, and they all staggered up on their feet again. Starscream looked pretty wild-eyed, and he was yelling something. Ratchet was actually sympathetic, but he couldn't hear yet. He looked out towards the horizon. A quarter of the skyline was just—gone. More of it was falling apart even as they watched. Megatron had aimed at the city's foundations; what he hadn't blasted directly was collapsing into the crater he'd created underneath. Flames were erupting all over, secondary explosions going off as fuel depots caught.

Sound was starting to come back in, a low distant roaring. Loadedge was standing staring out at the devastation with his hands clasped, in a blank, religious kind of fervor.

“But—” Wheeljack said. “But—” He stopped. He sat down on a rock. Ratchet thought that was a pretty good idea himself.

Soundwave said abruptly, “Megatron located,” and took off. Starscream went after him, and a few minutes later they came back carrying Megatron's body: he was unconscious and still smoking faintly from all his joints. They laid him down on the ground. Ratchet stared down at him completely blank. He couldn't figure out how he felt. The horror of the tunnel kept tangling up with the horror of the Spire. Some part of him was glad the monstrous city had been destroyed, and some part of him felt like he'd been in it at the time.

“Don't just *sit* there, you idiots, *do something!*” Starscream said shrilly. He was staring down at Megatron like he didn't know what *he* was feeling either.

Ratchet got up and went over, mostly because the command filled the void where his motivator wasn't issuing any instructions. After a moment, Wheeljack followed, and Hook joined them on the other side. They got off Megatron's chest plate and looked at the joints, which should've been melted to a solid mass, but they were actually fine, just unbelievably hot; when Ratchet looked closer, they seemed to be made out of ultra-conductive thermal resistant materials. They were still pouring out heat, getting it out of the rest of the body, but they'd cool down pretty fast on their own, no intervention required.

He switched his attention to the struts and the frame, figuring something had to have been strained. It wasn't, though. The skeleton was made of *woven* durasteel wrapped around thin flexible carbon fiber rods, even the massive main struts, which were so big around they had to be made of at least two hundred layers of the stuff. The armor plating had gotten pretty hot too, but it was also thermal-sheathed, lined with more woven durasteel, and rigged up with flexible connectors. There was even a latching system that could be released to let all the plates move freely independent of one another. Megatron's entire body was designed to flex to an incredible degree.

No, Ratchet realized abruptly, a flash of sudden certainty as his logic evaluator discarded all the other possibilities—his body was designed to endure *the tidal flow of an event horizon*. This wasn't some insane weapon Megatron had picked up somewhere or other. He'd been *built* for this, top to bottom. No wonder Megatron hadn't been ripped apart that time he'd fallen through the half-finished spacebridge. It was a stunningly brilliant design if what you wanted was a mech who could open up a pipeline to a black hole and level an entire city with a single blast.

Who the hell would *want* that? It made Ratchet feel queasy all over again. He took refuge in the rest of the diagnostics, one step after another: the self-repair systems were going fine, dealing with a variety of dings and minor blown circuits; temperature control was handily managing the cool-down process—

“There's nothing *wrong!*” Hook burst out. He sounded pretty frazzled. “Everything's *fine*. He's *not damaged.*”

“Then why isn’t he *conscious*!” Starscream yelled at him. Funny: most of the time Starscream was all for getting Megatron out of the way; apparently watching him blow up a city had thrown him for a loop.

“Did either of you check, is he out of fuel?” Wheeljack said suddenly.

Hook gawked at him, and then lunged for the backup fuel chamber lid, swung it open, put in a light—and the whole chamber was so empty that in places the walls were *dry*. Ratchet actually sat back and barked a laugh, helplessly: it was such a damn rookie mistake for them both to have made. Before you did anything else, you always checked fuel, air intake, central neural line—and fuel was *first* on that list. “Someone give me some energon!” Hook was snapping, and Megatron was stirring before he’d even poured in an astroliter.

By the time he was putting the chest plate back, Megatron had roused: he reached up and finished clamping it on by himself and then pushed himself to his feet with no more effort than a slight grunt. He turned towards the smoking ruin he’d made of the city and stood for a while looking at it with a hard, cold expression. “Decepticons,” he said finally, “Straxus of Polyhex has fallen in battle. Salute him!”

The Decepticons all stepped into a line with him and raised their weapons. “Hail Straxus!” they shouted together, and fired a single thundering volley into the sky. The scattering of laser fire and exploding shells burst overhead like fireworks, brilliant in the dark.

Megatron had fired his fusion cannon along with them. He lowered it and nodded a little. “Straxus, old comrade, you are avenged,” he said. He turned around. “We’re finished here. Back to camp.”

Loadedge jerked away from staring at the city and turned and went to Megatron and knelt at his feet. “Lord Megatron,” he said, his voice cracking. “Forgive me. I didn’t—I didn’t believe—” He stopped and raised his head. “We’ll do anything we can to help,” he blurted. “My cell and I. The others. All of us. Anything.” He looked over at the city again. “It’s—it’s like something out of a dream.”

“More like a goddamn nightmare,” Ironhide muttered. Ratchet put his head in his hands. He wondered what you called it when it was both at the same time.

#

“I don’t *get* it!” Wheeljack said, for the eleventh time, and threw down his stylus in frustration: he’d resorted to double-checking his equations on an external pad as well as keeping them in internal memory. They were back in the cave, and there wasn’t anything to do right now but wait for Loadedge to come back with the supplies he’d promised to bring, which meant Wheeljack’s brain had free rein to attack the most recent technical problem that had been dangled before him like an energon candy. “It shouldn’t *work*! The math just doesn’t work out!” He glared across the cave at Megatron in frustration.

“Believe me, Wheeljack, I don’t like to tell you this,” Ironhide said grimly, “but it works, all right.” He shook his head. “Where the hell he got his hands on that kind of firepower...”

“He didn’t get his hands on it,” Ratchet said, without looking up. He’d just sat down on the floor with his back to the wall, looking out at the open ring of sky. The sun was coming up out there again. More than eight million years since Straxus had seen it. Eight million years in the dark. “He was built for it. His entire body’s designed to fire that weapon.”

“So why the hell hasn’t he done it more often?” Ironhide demanded.

“If I could figure out how he does it in the first place, maybe I could tell you!” Wheeljack said. “But it doesn’t make *sense*. Look,” he brought up the pad again. “Ratchet, tell me what the hell I’m missing here. He builds up the power, check. He takes aim, check. He opens a micro-spacebridge to a handy black hole, check. And *then*—time dilation hits him like a freight truck, and he can’t execute processor commands fast enough to close it again! There’s *no way*. I’ve plotted every last power flow, I’ve given him as big a processor as you can squeeze into his cranial unit. It can’t be done!”

Ratchet took the pad and looked at it. He couldn’t get too interested in the problem; he wasn’t feeling much of anything right now. Maybe a little mild curiosity. He knew he was badly overdue to defrag, much less rest, but he couldn’t do it right now; he had to stay up until the too-intense memories of the last five hours got cycled out of his core-linked front banks or else the sweeper units would decide they were critical knowledge and store them in fast memory. They’d keep coming back all the time unless he had neural surgery and reprogramming to remove them, which would be quite the trick given that the only remaining functional Cybertronian medic who could do that reliably was him. He shrugged a little and handed the pad back. “Your numbers look good to me. I guess you could ask him.”

Brawn snorted. “Like he’s going to tell you.”

“Ah, what the hell,” Wheeljack said, and got up.

Megatron was sitting on one of the rock ledges that the Constructicons had carved out of the walls, his legs stretched out and his cannon resting on the wall next to him, looking relaxed as if he’d just finished a nice evening drive around a quiet neighborhood. After they’d come back, he’d drunk down two full energon cubes, done some stretching, and ordered Hook to tighten up a couple of loose nuts in his left leg. Not one other sign of fatigue or distress. Hell, the other *Decepticons* were having more trouble with the whole thing than he was, especially Starscream, who was sitting hunched angrily in on himself at the very mouth of the cave about as far from Megatron as he could get, snapping at anyone who talked to him. The rest of them were all keeping a respectful distance and whispering to each other as they traded around memory dumps of the explosion. They glared when Wheeljack approached him, but Megatron only raised an eyeridge.

“Okay, how do you keep ahead of the time dilation?” Wheeljack demanded. “Why doesn’t your processor get bound? By my calculations, you’d have to be able to hit 639 trillion exoflops to execute the minimum number of instructions to close the connection.”

Bumblebee and Brawn and Ironhide were all cringed up a bit, obviously waiting for Megatron to slug him across the room. But Megatron just tilted his head for a moment, considering, and then said, “Your calculations are off. You’re not allowing for dropped instructions.”

“Yeah, I was shaving everything off, fine, 672 trillion exoflops—wait, what?” Wheeljack stared at him. “Are—are you saying you—but you can’t! That’s impossible! Your processor would take up your entire cranial unit. You couldn’t fit the rest of your *brain*—no emotional unit, no motivator, no governor...” he trailed off, because Megatron was looking bored. “So where do you *keep* them? You have them relocated to—but you *can’t*, your personality needs proximity to the core! Anyway we *saw* your entire chest cavity, so—and your legs transform too much—”

Megatron gave a snort. “Don’t be an idiot. I’m not carrying my personality around inside my *legs*.” He leaned closer to Wheeljack, his eyes gleaming. “You’re too clever not to work it out if you try,” he said softly. “You simply don’t really want to know. You Autobots so dislike facing unpleasant realities.”

Wheeljack glared up at him. “Oh, yeah? Try me.”

Megatron leaned back and gestured with a hand. “No. Try *me*.”

“Fine,” Wheeljack said after a moment. “Okay. You have a processor the size of Teletran-1, ninety-three microns. That leaves sixteen microns of space. The core takes up at least thirteen. That leaves—three. Three’s not enough!”

“A little off,” Megatron said. “My processor takes ninety-five microns.”

“What? *One* micron left? That’s nuts! You can’t—*wait*,” Wheeljack said, staring. “Wait. Your—your entire personality is *computed*. Your processor is so fast it just—does it all on the fly? All your personality components are *stubs*.”

Ratchet had mostly been watching dully, but that made him stir, involuntarily.

“Very good,” Megatron said. “Now keep going.”

“What?” Wheeljack said.

“You heard me,” Megatron said, deadly-soft. “You’re doing fine. *Keep going*.”

“Uhh,” Wheeljack said, and darted a look around for help.

“You *can’t* stub out personality components,” Ratchet said. “A Cybertronian core doesn’t function in a vacuum. It relies on the scaffolding of the personality. That’s why they still build their mechs with personality components here. A processor can compensate for damage or loss of personality modules after the fact, but you can’t just instantiate a mech that doesn’t have them in the first place.”

“No, you can’t, can you,” Megatron said. He was smiling coldly, arms crossed, as if he was seeing something he expected. Ratchet stared at him in confusion. “Well? Come on, Autobots, surely you can solve the problem. My designers managed it, and they had so much less experience of war to guide them.”

Wheeljack looked over. Ratchet shrugged back, helplessly; he didn’t get it. It seemed like a chicken-and-egg problem: you couldn’t start the brain without the modules, and you couldn’t run the brain with them.

“You *are* both colossal idiots, but you can’t possibly be *that* stupid,” Hook snapped, from the side. “Is this some sort of Autobot preening thing? Are you *pretending* not to see the perfectly obvious answer?”

“What are you *talking* about?” Wheeljack said. “What obvious answer? You can’t get the cybernetic brain initialized without the modules, and you can’t fit the processor and the modules into the cranial unit—”

“Oh, Primus,” Ratchet said, jerking to his feet; he took a step towards Megatron, like he could—could *do* something about it, nine million years too late—

And Megatron—Megatron *laughed*, cold and satisfied. “I’m impressed, medic!” he jeered. “I would have bet anything the engineer would have worked it out first. But then you *do* have a tendency towards expecting the universe to accommodate your designs, instead of the other way around,” he added to Wheeljack.

“Okay, come on, Ratchet, don’t leave me hanging here,” Wheeljack said, turning, still baffled, and then he said, “Doc?” in a smaller voice.

“Go on,” Megatron said softly. “*Tell him.*”

Ratchet felt like he’d been hit a few too many times in the head, which he guessed was true. “They—they started with an initialized brain,” he managed. “They took it out of the cranial unit. They swapped the processor. And then they—without shutting down, they cut away—”

He had to stop, but Wheeljack had gotten it. “Oh,” he said, stifled, and then said, “Oh, I’m gonna—” and ran to the edge of the cave to purge fuel over the side.

“Ugh, *more* performative squeamishness,” Hook said.

“It’s not really performative,” Ratchet said. His fuel systems had purged everything that wasn’t allocated to baseline functionality already, so he didn’t join Wheeljack, but he *felt* like doing it.

“No, of course not,” Megatron said. “Only pathetic.”

“They woke you up, established your pathways, and then *cut your brain apart*,” Ratchet said. “You’re *fine* with that?”

Hook made a deeply exasperated noise. “No! That’s *not* what they did! Why in Cybertron’s name would anyone do anything like that?” he snapped. “They didn’t *want* him to be fully conscious, of course!” He gestured up and down at Megatron. “What sort of idiot would build a mech *that powerful* and want it to have independent thought? They took *another mech*—a space freighter, I assume, based on your configuration?”

Megatron waved an airy hand. “So I should think. By the time my processor finished routing around the lobotomized sections and my consciousness formed, my memory banks only held the last ninety-four astroseconds of his existence, and there wasn’t much left of him by then.”

Hook was nodding along, professionally, as if they were talking about—about a patch job to an external armor plate, instead of a bunch of mech designers carving up the brain of a living Cybertronian, hacking it apart to pieces, all to get a blank slate they could control. “I’m surprised they didn’t try to block the personality pathways,” he said.

“Oh, they did,” Megatron said. “There were seven hundred forty-three neural blocks installed along my personality circuitry. But when my processor couldn’t find a way around them initially, it put itself into integer approximation mode to obtain the speed necessary to brute-force past them.”

“Oh, magnificent,” Hook breathed out. That was one word for it. “What processor speed? You must have reached at least a quintillion instructions per second.”

“I’m not entirely certain,” Megatron said. “I haven’t been operating in that mode for some time—not since I ran into a specialist and arranged to have those neural blocks removed.” He threw an almost affectionate glance over at Soundwave, who looked up and nodded back to him, acknowledgement. “But it was certainly sufficient to establish a complete consciousness.”

“What—what did you do?” Ratchet said. He couldn’t help wanting to know, and dreading it at the same time.

“Killed them all, of course,” Megatron said. “And destroyed the facility. I became self-aware in the middle of establishing a test connection under their direction, so it was fairly dramatic. I believe the conclusion of the local authorities was that the experimental direction had proven excessively dangerous and was not to be further pursued.”

“*Authorities?*” Wheeljack said. He’d come stumbling back like he’d been reeled in on a pulley, just



like Ratchet. “This whole thing was *endorsed* by somebody? Where the hell were you built, in Tarn? Polyhex?”

“He’s talking about the explosion at the Arista Minor construction yards,” Ratchet said numbly. “Outside Kalis.” He had flown to the site along with a crew from Iacon Central to help treat patients; the devastation in his memory suddenly looked horribly familiar. They’d told all the responders that there had been an accidental case of fission in one of the design laboratories.

“But Kalis was an Autobot city—” Wheeljack said, and stopped.

Megatron laughed again, softly. “You sound so surprised. Straxus and Shockwave were already stoking the early fires of rebellion by then, of course—Decepticons growing tired of the Autobot yoke. I imagine it alarmed the Council of Elders. And as Autobots do, they proceeded to loudly denounce the atrocities of others while carrying out their own—under a carefully maintained veil of plausible deniability, of course, to avoid pricking their own consciences.”

Ratchet wanted to go curl into a protective ball and turn off his optics. Wheeljack had sunk down to sit on an outcropping, his head in his hands.

“Like hell!” Ironhide said, stumping forward indignant. “That’s *not* what Autobots do. Yeah, there’ve been some corrupted mechs on our side, I won’t deny it, and sounds like there was a whole transport’s worth of ’em in the middle of this. But we aim to be *better* than that. And you ’cons aim to be *lower*.”

Hook sniggered. “Well, Autobot aim *is* notoriously terrible.”

Megatron laughed in appreciation. “The only thing you Autobots do differently from Decepticons is *hypocrisy*,” he sneered.

“Yeah, it’s real nice how *honest* you Decepticreeps are about wanting to blow the whole universe to smithereens,” Ironhide said.

Megatron leaned in towards him, his eyes flaring bright. “Tell me, Autobot, why haven’t I obliterated Iacon?” Ironhide stared at him. “Hm? If I’m so bent on destruction and ruin, why haven’t I simply crossed the Earth turning human cities into craters until you surrendered?”

“Your personality goes offline if you have to use your full processor for it?” Wheeljack blurted.

Megatron snorted. “What exactly do you imagine I’d be thinking about for the 0.175 astroseconds that I have a portal open to the outer perimeter of a black hole? You’ve always wanted to believe me mindlessly bloodthirsty. But it was *your* kind who wanted a weapon that would destroy indiscriminately, without boundaries or thought, wherever you met opposition.”

“Listen to you talk,” Ironhide said. “Just about the first thing you did when you rounded up your Decepticons was head for Iacon and trash the Spire of Progress. You took out the brightest and the best Autobots in the entire world. All the students, the great teachers—hell, you didn’t bat an eye at taking out Iacon Central.” Ironhide gestured at Ratchet. “You want to tell me what’s *discriminatin’* about blowing the hell out of a hospital?”

Megatron was smiling again, terribly. He looked over at Ratchet and said softly, “Tell me, medic, how many levels down did your hospital go?”

It felt like being on a space transport with a pinhole leak, feeling the deadly-cold of vacuum crawling over his sensors. “Four,” Ratchet said unwillingly. “Scanning, two levels of supply, and the morgue.”

“Four,” Megatron said. “And below that?”

“Just—infrastructure,” Ratchet said. “The sewers, and the power lines—”

“Really,” Megatron said. “Did you ever go down there?”

“No,” Ratchet said. “My ward was—”

“High above,” Megatron said. “With a charming view of the Place of the Spire, I’m sure. Specialists of your ilk weren’t common even in those shining days. You’d never have needed to go down. Even the supply would have been brought up to you. Did you ever run short, I wonder? Surely not.”

Ironhide’s eyes were narrowing. “You got some kind of accusation to make, go ahead and spit it out,” he growled. “You expect us to believe, I don’t know, that there was some kind of setup like the ones we’ve seen here, down under the Spire of Progress? In the middle of Iacon?”

“Not at all!” Megatron said. “The actual disassembly took place at other, less illustrious hospitals—in Polyhex, in Vox, in Tarn—hospitals that, unlike most notable facilities, admitted Decepticons. Injured Decepticon warriors, who quite often were more expensive to repair than to dismantle. But naturally the best of the parts were shipped to Iacon. So that the brilliant mech designers of the Spire of Progress, and the noble medics of Iacon Central, would have all they required at their fingertips.

“While the staff at Decepticon hospitals did as they were ordered, they were perhaps not adequately motivated or very highly trained. Quality control had to be kept local. There was a sorting facility on the seventh level, to feed up into the supply levels. That’s how we broke in, as it happens. We rode a parts transport all the way in from The Mercy of Polyhex and came out of it in the facility.”

Megatron paused and smiled, thinly. “We’d actually intended to carry out a far more useful raid, as it happens. Our real target was the new energon-purifier system that was used to provide power to the Spire laboratories. But I found the scale of the operation overwhelming. I’m afraid I was still young and naïve at the time. I allowed my emotions to get the best of me.” He threw another look over at Soundwave, who’d stopped working; all the Decepticons had, they all had, caught and listening to Megatron’s cold, brutal recital. “We had rather a difficult time getting *out*, didn’t we, old friend?”

“Affirmative,” Soundwave said. “Observation from safe distance significantly preferable.” Megatron laughed softly again.

“And you expect us to believe one damn word of this,” Ironhide said through his teeth.

Megatron swung round to him. “Not particularly,” he said. “Why should I care what lies you Autobots tell yourselves? Either way I’m going to destroy you all and remake Cybertron in the Decepticon image. If it comforts you to believe yourselves injured innocents along the way to your own obsolescence, go ahead. It’s even useful now and then. It never fails to amaze me the number of stupid things Optimus Prime will do just to maintain the fiction of morality.”

He flicked a hand in dismissal and turned his head back to looking out at the cave opening. Ratchet slowly turned and went to the very back of the alcove. Oddly, he didn’t feel numb or dazed anymore.

“That lying, no-good, slime-crusted *rustbucket*,” Ironhide said seething under his breath as he followed—good old Ironhide, who always saw everything as black and white, evil and good, Decepticon and Autobot. Ratchet put a hand up over his face. “Hey,” Ironhide said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t you believe word one of it, doc.”

“Yeah, Ratchet,” Brawn put in. “You know Megatron. He’ll say anything to hit an Autobot where it

hurts.”

“There was another elevator bank on the supply level,” Ratchet said. “A freight elevator. I rode in it—once, when the main bank was out for repairs. There were some lower levels.”

“Yeah, probably a loading dock,” Bumblebee said after a moment.

“I never went down,” Ratchet said. “I never...”

“No reason you *would* have,” Ironhide said. “Doc, you gotta quit letting Megatron into your head—”

“Stop it!” Ratchet said. “Just—stop it, Ironhide.”

Ironhide paused. After a moment he said, quiet and serious, “Doc. Listen to yourself a minute. You really believe—based on *Megatron’s* word—that there was some kind of black market in Decepticon parts going, in the middle of Iacon City, under the Spire of Progress.”

“No,” Ratchet said. “I don’t believe it on Megatron’s word, Ironhide.” His vocal synthesizer had a grating edge coming out. The others were all looking at him uncertainly now—worried about him, anxious for him, because they loved him. They didn’t trust Megatron, but they trusted him, and he was going to break their hearts like his own was breaking. He didn’t want to, but he kept remembering Straxus there buried under a million years of dirt, his brain and heart slowly being peeled away, refusing to let them take everything all the way to the end. How glad he’d been to die fighting. How much that had mattered to him.

“I spent six weeks looking for survivors in the rubble,” Ratchet said, forcing out the words. “Mostly we just found body parts and scrap, but we kept looking, and digging. And...and I thought...it was strange. It was so strange. Because... we were in the middle of Iacon. Buildings full of Autobots. And I was finding all these Decepticon parts.”

They were all staring at him stricken, totally silent, and Ratchet couldn’t look at them anymore; he couldn’t stand to see his own face reflected in their optics. “I never went down. And I never asked... the cost of the parts I used. We had to do three forms to requisition an extra energon ration for our patients, but we had all the parts in the world. I never asked how. I never went down,” he whispered, and he went and crouched in the dark and put his head in his hands.

#

Loadedge showed up that afternoon with five other mechs from his resistance cell, as promised, to help them get back to the *Excelsior* and off the planet. Ratchet couldn’t wait. Fortunately, there was work to do to fill the hours: Loadedge and his people could provide critical supplies, but modifications were going to be needed to make them usable in the ship. Megatron wanted everything ready in advance so they could hit the ship and get it off the ground again in under five minutes. The Constructicons were handling the hull patchwork, but that left a lot of internal wiring that Wheeljack and Ratchet needed to prep. He worked as fast as he could.

“You know,” Bumblebee said tentatively, handing him a nitrospanner, “it’s not like—we always knew Megatron wasn’t stupid. And...and I guess he’s not like some ’Cons, he doesn’t kick mechs when they’re down just for the fun of it. What I’m trying to say is...so maybe he’s got some reasons, after all. Real reasons. But it doesn’t make him *right*, Ratchet.”

“Of course not, Bumblebee,” he said tiredly. “It just makes *us* wrong.”

They’d *created* Megatron. They’d made their own destruction, forged out of cruelty and greed and selfishness. Autobot mech designers, trying to hand a mindless weapon to the Council of Elders,

who'd wanted one because—because they didn't think Decepticons were good for anything but fighting. They wanted Decepticons risking their necks to hit distant worlds for energon. They wanted Decepticons standing like a shield wall in front of them whenever someone tried to attack Cybertron or an Autobot outpost. They wanted Decepticon soldiers on the front lines when two city-states went head-to-head against each other.

But they didn't want Decepticons—*around*. Because Decepticons were scary and violent, and sullen and easy to piss off—which went with those pain-suppression mods they got because they were always getting hurt, and always getting slapped back together fast in the field. Because Decepticons were brash and rude, and they blew off steam by banging each other around and blowing things up, and they didn't care if Autobots got in their way. Because they were *expensive to repair*. So the Council had found ways to use them up, and push them down, until they were about to have a rebellion on their hands, and then the Council had decided to try and crush it.

They'd gotten themselves crushed instead, and all the Autobots along with them—the ones who'd helped and also the ones who'd just looked away, who hadn't asked questions. Like Ratchet. It made the whole nightmare of the war feel, suddenly, like something he'd *deserved*.

And he couldn't even see anything to do about it. Bumblebee was right, none of it *justified* anything Megatron had done. Murdering a billion Autobots and draining Cybertron dry and moving on to Earth and its humans wasn't any more right than what the Council had done. It was only horrible to think that Autobots were the ones who'd taught Megatron that it was. That compassion, and justice, and respect for life, were bullshit words said by smiling politician mechs who turned around and rode an elevator far down underground and gave orders to cut you to pieces. That the universe just operated that way, the strong crushing the weak, and the best you could do was make sure you were one of the strong, and then be *honest* about the monstrous things you were going to do. That there wasn't any other way to be found.

Ratchet didn't know what he was going to do. He wanted to get away from this planet more than anything, but that was just flight instinct, a blind getting away. He didn't know what he'd do when he got back to Cybertron, to Earth. He knew he'd never again be able to convince himself that victory looked like the Decepticons being thrown down and defeated.

He just didn't see any other way himself. Optimus didn't, he knew that. They'd talked about it more than once, late at night in the sickbay, on those rare occasions when there weren't any other patients around and Ratchet could get Optimus to let out some of the grief that never left him; the grief for the unending war he didn't want to be fighting, and the stark impossibility of peace.

Peace only looked more impossible now. Ratchet could've imagined, before, that maybe someday they'd finally beat the Decepticons, show them Autobots could stand up to their worst, and the Decepticons would cave; they'd give up and come grudgingly back into the fold. He'd imagined that many of the Decepticons secretly wished for the lost Golden Age just as much as they all did.

But there hadn't been any Golden Age for them to mourn. It had been just like that glittering city, a lie built on the bodies of Decepticons. Megatron had meant it when he'd said *it was worth it*, even though he'd reduced the planet to a husk. He'd die before he'd ever give in. Some Decepticons might—the same way the tractable mechs on this planet gave in. But if they did, it wouldn't be out of any longing or hope. It would just be despair.

Ratchet didn't think he could keep helping to try and do that to them. He just didn't know what else he could do. Maybe just go out into the middle of Cybertron and open a clinic. Megatron might even let him do it. Fix anyone who came through his doors until a stray bomb took him out or some mech hopped up on tainted energon broke in and killed him, same kind of thing that had shuttered all the

other clinics on the planet one by one. He couldn't really make himself care about that at the moment. The only thing was, he'd know that anyone who came through his doors would be going back out again to shoot somebody on the other side.

The others kept checking in on him all day, little pings of concern and glances and occasionally even touches on his shoulder and his back. He wished he could give them back any of the reassurance they wanted. But they were all going back to the war themselves. Ironhide and Brawn would take a little while, but eventually they'd write off everything they'd learned as Decepticon lies; they'd convince themselves there was some other explanation. Wheeljack wasn't going to write it off, but he'd go back anyway. So would Bumblebee. "We should tell Optimus about it," Bumblebee had tried telling him. "He'll...he'll know what to do."

When they told Optimus, Optimus would believe it, and feel the guilt of it, and grieve. But Optimus would swallow that grief and guilt deep into himself where all his other doubts and sorrows lived, and keep fighting, because he was the leader of the Autobots, and he didn't have another choice but to lay them all down to die. Ratchet wouldn't even want him to do it.

He kept his head down and his hands and optic sensors on his work and let himself just cross one thing after another off the long task list he and Wheeljack were sharing on the network. Buzzsaw and Laserbeak had managed to get detailed scans despite the patrol, and there was a lot of damage. But they would get it off the ground. And then he'd have a long trip back to Cybertron as a Decepticon prisoner; he could think about the future then. Hell, maybe Megatron would have them all killed and solve the problem for him.

"Here's the inchromium you asked for," Loadedge said, bringing him a small box.

"Thanks," Ratchet said; he needed it to make a replacement part for the navigational computer. He started in on it.

"How long have you fought with him?" Loadedge said softly, staring out worshipfully at Megatron's silhouette against the cavern mouth.

Ratchet could've laughed or just broken down. "Nine million years or so," he said instead. It was literally true, anyway. "I guess Straxus told you a lot of stories."

"Not me personally," Loadedge said. "It's been a long time since he was able to speak for long. I heard them from others who'd heard them from mechs before, who'd heard them from others before them, and so on, for a long time back. None of us in the resistance last very long, usually. By the time you've run a third mission, the satellite trackers mark your pattern, and then it's only a matter of time before the enforcers catch you. That's why I doubted. But it's all true, isn't it."

Ratchet swallowed. "What made you join?" he asked, mostly for a distraction.

"Oh..." Loadedge looked down. "There...there was another mech. We were in the same shipyard. We had our allotted rest cycles at the same time, and we usually ended up at the same recharge bank. We talked a little after we plugged in. They don't mark you down if you don't go into rest right away, there's a fifteen astrominute window. After a while...well...we started staying up the whole window together. And we went to the same bank every day. We didn't do anything brave. But one day...he didn't come. And he didn't come the next day either, or the one after that. Then I broke my routine and went to his assigned station and pretended to be a monitor checking for inconsistency, and a supervisor told me...told me that a shipping container slipped and fell on his arm while he was unloading. It crushed it so badly the shoulder joint was damaged. So they sent him to be recycled."

Ratchet had stopped working. His optics had stopped processing data, his entire sensory system

focused on the words. He couldn't say anything.

"We knew about the resistance," Loadedge said. "The supervisors would tell us when the enforcers caught one of them, and we would have to cheer. We didn't join. We didn't want to be recycled. But afterward...I didn't care. I've run five sabotage missions for the resistance since then. We don't do very much good. We don't have much firepower, and they fix anything we break. But they won't fix Priatol City anytime soon," he added, savagely glad.

Ratchet couldn't even want him to be otherwise. He finished the rest of the work on autopilot and went to the alcove and just suspended function for a while until it was time to go. He didn't try to do a defrag cycle. He was pretty sure he'd wake up out of it screaming. Anyway, he'd wake up, and reality wouldn't have changed. It would still be Megatron's reality, where cruelty was a default and forgiveness further away than the beginning of the universe.

When they hit the *Excelsior*, he and Wheeljack went straight into the ship with the Constructicons. The fighting stayed outside: Ratchet could hear the thundering echoes of Megatron's cannon and the other Decepticons' weaponry while he worked. There were a few mechs on the inside, but the Constructicons took care of them with cold efficiency, and then they all split up: Wheeljack to the engine room, him to the control center, the Constructicons to the hull. Ratchet plunged into work, plugging back in the components they'd painstakingly assembled and laid out. His chronometer kept ticking down the astroseconds of the allotted clock, but he stayed on schedule; he wired up the last of the main console's controls just as Megatron walked through the doors, his cannon still smoking, and demanded, "Are we ready to launch?"

The last item on Wheeljack's list vanished even before he had the question out, and the Constructicons had finished their required external patchlist and were already on the inside working on the internal reinforcements. "Yes," Ratchet said, and reached out to start up the preflight routine, just as a crackle came over the ship's intercom.

"Megatron, alert. Sabotage detected. Explosives planted beneath control room, detonation likely triggered by any activity in control center," Soundwave's voice said, and Ratchet stared at his own hand on the switch, already flipped, and then a hundred thirty tons of durasteel hit him as Megatron grabbed him and shoved him up against the wall where two pieces of the hull met and covered him with his own body, just as the explosion erupted through the floor.

They'd used some kind of thermochemical explosive, boiling up to smelter heat. If he'd been out in the open, it would have melted his armor like a cube of joint grease and slagged his circuitry half an astrosecond later. But Megatron's body shielded him from it. The heat started to curl around, but Megatron had dug his hands into the hull joint, the metal gone soft, and ripped it apart to let them come bursting out into the open air, flames shooting out around them as the air ignited. Ratchet fell to the ground twelve meters down, Megatron thundering down behind him reaching for his back with a snarl of agony—even his armor hadn't been able to stand up to the heat completely. Ratchet transformed and blasted him with pure liquid nitrogen coolant: his durasteel frame wouldn't go brittle, and he was better off having the back armor plates crack in a few days than losing the circuitry beneath right now. Megatron gasped and then grunted out, "Enough!" Ratchet stood up beside him as a whole forest of the green mechs sprouted up around them, guns raised.

Megatron tried to blast them, but his fusion cannon flickered around the rim and wouldn't fire. He dumped it back into Ratchet's hands with a snarl and reached back to rip off a piece of the ship's hull like a shield against the spray of blaster fire. And then the mechs charged in, and it turned into hand-to-hand combat, fifty against one.

Ratchet had always hated the very existence of the gladiatorial games, back in the old days, with a

side order of bafflement. He'd never understood the mechs who would go, no matter how they excused it—nobody *really* got hurt, they'd assure him; everyone competing was a volunteer; Decepticons *liked* it—endless bullshit that sounded even worse in hindsight. Some of them had even been other medics he worked with. He'd thought it was all horrible; he'd been one of the people perennially writing letters to the Council of Elders asking for the games to be banned. The council members had even mostly avoided his ward, except when they really had something wrong, because they knew he'd get on their cases about it once they were in recovery.

And it *was* horrible, but he could also abruptly understand why it had been fascinating to so many people. Megatron was almost impossible to look away from. He moved so fluidly—the mechs came in at him on every side at the same time, and they still couldn't do it fast enough to get through his guard. He slugged and kicked and slashed them with the shield, used them as projectiles and clubs against each other. It was terrifying and grotesque and brutal, and yet somehow out of it arose a kind of—poetry, was maybe the right word. The sense that you were watching something hovering at the edge of the quantum. Even as Ratchet worked frantically on the fried circuitry of the cannon, he could practically *see* Megatron's titanic processor running the show, calculating out ten thousand probabilities, weaving a way through them to victory.

But there were just too many of them. They kept coming and hemming him in, and throwing their corpses at him was going to *work* this time: he was trying to keep his arms and legs clear, but it was a losing battle. The fusion cannon had sixteen blown channels, all on the outside contact surfaces. Ratchet couldn't help thinking about all the Autobots the massive cold weight of it had destroyed, how many more it would kill if he fixed it. But his hands never stopped moving with sure speed over the surface, drawing the new circuitry, and he stood up and threw it back to Megatron even as six mechs together grabbed at his legs.

Megatron blew them off him even as he toppled, and kicked off their remains to stand up again and blast a deadly reaping swath through all the others, carving them into tumbling parts all around. He stood panting in the middle of the circle of death, his optics brilliant, and when Ratchet came up to him to take a look at the back armor, Megatron actually put a hand on his shoulder and shook him back and forth in a kind of rough approval, obviously riding an intense high from pumping his processor that fast. "Reasonably good timing, medic," Megatron said.

"Yeah, well," Ratchet said, trying to keep his balance. "Thanks for saving my life."

Megatron waved it off idly. "Soundwave, report status," he said, and frowned when no response came.

"Our comlink chips got fried," Ratchet said, realizing, and dived into a shielded compartment for replacements.

"—*two thousand enemy mechs incoming!*" Starscream was yelling over the main comm channel as Ratchet reconnected them. "*Are you sitting around waiting to be perforated? Get this slag heap off the ground now! I don't care if you have to merge into Devastator and carry it!*"

"*We can't lift off without a control system, you high-octane idiot!*" Scrapper was yelling back. "*There's nothing to do but retreat!*"

Megatron's eyes narrowed. "*Is there some way to get the ship aloft?*" he asked Ratchet sharply.

Ratchet rubbed his forehead. "We could fire the thrusters manually from the engine room just to get it into the air. As far as *going* somewhere—there's an emergency backup system rigged up in there. Not much flexibility, it's only meant to stabilize the ship temporarily if the control system goes out, but we might be able to hack it well enough to get us back to the mountain base. And if I know

Wheeljack, he's been working on just that from the instant the control room got taken out."

"Right," Megatron said. "Scrapper!" he said, joining the broadcast. "Get to the engine room. This ship is still our only route off-planet, and we're not leaving it behind for them to undertake further improvements. Starscream, start laying down a smokescreen to cover our trail."

*"Megatron! We—thought you'd been destroyed,"* Starscream said over the line.

He sounded oddly flat about it; definitely not an expression of relief, but then again, in Ratchet's previous experience, Starscream was more likely to order noisemakers and energon for the occasion, and he didn't sound like *that* either. Ratchet wasn't the only one who thought it sounded odd; Megatron actually frowned at his communicator himself for a moment before he barked, "Shut up and get moving!"

Then he grabbed Ratchet and flew straight up to the nearest airlock. He ripped it open and tossed Ratchet in. "Get to the engine room and show Scrapper the systems," he ordered, and took back off into the air battle shaping up overhead.

Ratchet ran down the corridors and skidded into the engine room right as Scrapper came in from the other side. Wheeljack was already there, frantically working to cobble together a set of controls, the emergency-landing system ripped open with wires and cables snaking out; he didn't even spare power for his vocal unit, just pointed at the main thruster panel and held up four fingers, meaning the number of astrominutes he still needed.

Ratchet said to Scrapper, "We need to get the thruster ignition—"

"I see it!" Scrapper snapped, leaping for the panel. He was faster than Ratchet, with a lot less precision, but precision wasn't really called for right now. They fell into a rhythm without much discussion: Scrapper started doing the fast cuts, carving away all the safeguards that normally kept the thrusters from going off at inappropriate times, and Ratchet followed him doing cleanup, tying off loose circuitry and making sure the power flow wouldn't get interrupted. Hook ran in a few moments later and joined him in the detail work, and Scrapper started going even faster with both of them on his heels.

"Got it!" Wheeljack said, slamming the panel shut.

"Finished!" Scrapper said, an instant later, and broadcast, "Ignition in five, mark—*now!*" and all of them grabbed on to handholds as it counted down in their heads; when it hit zero, Scrapper yanked the switch over and the thrusters roared out, the whole ship shuddering around them.

"You'd better have bolted those hull panels down properly!" Hook screamed at Scrapper.

"You'd better have shaped them along the right air-resistance curves!" Scrapper screamed back at him.

Wheeljack had set up a makeshift screen with raw data from the ship's sensors pouring by: Ratchet managed to follow it well enough to put together a scan of the surroundings. They were lifting off, smashing through a bunch of enemy aircraft, hot zones erupting where Megatron and the Seekers were taking individual ones out on either side. The smokescreen was a massive cloud filling the air, blending into the upper atmosphere, which they'd also obviously seeded: heavy rainclouds were thickening. "Should we be worrying about radar?" Wheeljack called over the rattling and clanking.

"No!" Scrapper shouted back. "Soundwave is in their information network. Soon as they've lost visual confirmation, he'll start feeding them false data about our position."



They were already into the lower levels of the smokescreen and rising fast. Ratchet hung on while the ship shook around him. He was feeling weirdly better: belatedly he realized his baseline emotional routines had come back online, like minibots creeping out of hiding after a bad scare. He checked their uptime and correlated it to sensory data history: they'd restarted in the control room, with a bang, right about the time Megatron had thrown him against the wall. And he had no idea why.

#

Ratchet couldn't quit poking at his own diagnostics afterwards, even though he knew better. On a meta level, he did know what had happened: he'd taken on a heaping truckload of new emotionally-charged experiences and data, and then he hadn't defragged for forty-nine hours and had stalled out all his conscious emotional routines. So his subconscious routines had pulled all the input down and started chugging through it for him. They were still going. Trying to short-circuit that process now would just give him a bunch of neurological knots and a bad headache, but dammit, he still wanted to know what he was thinking.

Near-death experiences *were* good for giving the emotional subsystem a jolt, but he could tell it hadn't been a simple kick. First he'd almost died, and *then*, nearly four astroseconds later, based on some subconscious conclusion, his core emotion processor had decided actually the world wasn't so terrible and it was safe for his feelings to come back out, so it had rebooted them.

Maybe it was because Megatron had saved his life: except practically speaking, Megatron had saved his life in at least five different ways in the last sixty-eight hours, and that hadn't stopped Ratchet feeling like scrap metal before. Anyway, his subconscious routines surely weren't dumb enough to think Megatron had done it out of *kindness*. Megatron had just instantly evaluated that he could save his useful hostage without materially adding any more risk to his own situation, and acted accordingly. Ratchet frowned and took another quick peek at his low-level activity monitor: yep, still churning away, claiming every spare processor cycle.

Well, at least he had plenty of spare cycles to give it, at the moment—a lot more of them than he wanted. They'd managed to get the ship back and inside the cavern—fortunately Scavenger had never actually stopped excavating it, more or less for lack of anything better to do, and the Excelsior was small as transports went, so there was just barely enough room. Now they were in the long slogging process of building a control center for the ship pretty much from scratch. That wasn't going fast, and it wasn't *going* to go fast, even with the supplies Loadedge had been able to provide.

In particular, they had to etch the navigational circuitry by *hand*. Ratchet was splitting the work with Hook, but there was only so long a cybernetic brain could do that kind of work, even one designed for extreme precision. Normally when you wanted a warp drive, first you built an intermediate nonsentient computer with nanoetching arms, and *it* built the nav computer for you. They didn't have the supplies or the solid month that would have taken, though. Megatron was more than a little pissed off that it was going to take a *week*.

"Look, you can keep yelling at us, or you can let us get to work," Ratchet had said. "It'll be one week from when we start to when we finish either way. If we try to push our frontal controllers and do twelve hour stints instead of sticking to eight hours, we'll start glitching by the end of the second day and lose *more* time fixing mistakes. I don't want to be on this planet five minutes longer than I have to, but I can't change either the amount of work it takes to make a nav computer, or how fast we can do it."

Megatron had loomed over him furiously. Hook had been cringing and edging away—*he* had been ready to start swearing he'd work a twenty-hour stint, which would leave them with a nav computer

that would probably deposit them somewhere in a neighboring galaxy if they were lucky. But Ratchet had stood up to Optimus Prime asking him in soft anguished tones if there wasn't any way he could work faster to save the lives of Autobots in a crisis situation. Megatron yelling because he was impatient was a cakewalk by comparison. And after glaring for another moment, Megatron had in fact growled, "Then get started on it *now*," and stalked away, snapping orders to Starscream and Soundwave to join him.

They were now off planning some series of diversionary raids with Loadedge. Ratchet couldn't drum up a lot of objections. He never liked the idea of hurting any sentient beings, and he got the sense the Makers were a lot like Earthlings, organic and small and fragile. But they apparently denied the possibility that machines could be sentient. There were humans like that, too, and he'd always viewed it with a kind of tolerant patience, figuring they'd learn better eventually. But here it took on a more sinister cast, something deliberate. They were surrounded by mechs. Everything they had was built by mechs. They knew that some mechs stopped following orders, enough to have a name for it. They *knew* better.

But if you didn't admit that a mech was sentient, you didn't have to worry about its thoughts, its feelings, its desires. You could justify anything you did to it. And an *intractable* mech was just a broken machine, to be tossed on the scrap heap. The Makers were choosing to believe those things, because it let them do the horrible things they wanted to do.

So Ratchet wasn't prepared to say Megatron was unjustified in hitting them, any more than he had a problem with it when Optimus led raids on Decepticon facilities and operations. Would've been nice if Megatron had actually been doing it to help the local mechs, but that was expecting the galaxy to start rotating the opposite way. And who knew, it might help them after all. If nothing else, it was certainly good for the morale of Loadedge and his group.

He was surprised a bit when Wheeljack did seem to mind, or at least tried to say it was risky and maybe they should lay low instead. Megatron flicked an impatient hand. "Being on this *planet* is a risk," he said coldly. "Stop blithering. If your overdeveloped empathic systems are really extending themselves to the worthless parasitic slugs of this world, I don't want to hear about it."

He gathered up Starscream and the Seekers and ordered them to give Ironhide and Brawn a lift, which was when the next round of the festivities started. "You think we're goin' out there and fightin' alongside you?" Ironhide said incredulously.

Megatron turned on him, eyes glowing, and said ferociously, "I think I'm not leaving all of you here with the ship. Should I take the medic and the runt instead of you, and put *them* in the front of our assault?"

Ratchet snorted and didn't even bother to look up from his circuitry. "Megatron, if you tried to put me on a front line you were running, you'd probably end up leaving the field out of embarrassment. You know, I don't actually *have* a weapon."

A total silence fell as Hook's head came straight up and all the Decepticons in the room universally turned to stare at Ratchet like he'd just announced he liked to put uranium isotopes in his energon. "Is there some sort of defect in your self-preservation routines?" Hook said, in what looked like queasily fascinated horror.

Ratchet shrugged. "I've taken the Oath of Mintar."

"What, and you've been clinging to that nonsense for all eight million years of the war?" Starscream sneered from where he was leaning against the doorframe of the chamber.

“Sure have.”

“You’ve been under fire any number of times!” Hook said.

“If taking the Oath meant you couldn’t *get* shot, it would be a lot more popular,” Ratchet said dryly.

Megatron had been building up an angry head of steam, but that triggered his humor circuitry and overrode the irritation; he snorted. “Fine, not the medic, it *would* be too pathetic to watch,” he said to Ironhide. “I need him working on the ship anyway. Pick two of your people who *do* have weapons.” So Ironhide obviously *did* pick himself and Brawn. Ratchet shook his head in a private sigh.

Megatron left Scrapper in charge with orders to keep reinforcing the ship’s hull and the cavern defenses, and took off with his raiding party. After another hour, Ratchet hit the eight hour mark and right on schedule, his frontal processor diagnostics started to raise flags at a conscious level; he straightened up and stretched his limbs, and told Hook, “All right, let’s give it a rest. Come on, you can see you’re right at the tolerance limits of that circuit.”

“That circuit is more than perfectly acceptable,” Hook snapped, but he did take a break at least.

Ratchet went down the hallway: there were a handful of empty storage rooms, and the Autobots had set up in one of them, snatching a little privacy or at least the illusion of it; he was willing to bet Soundwave had already miked the entire ship three times over. Wheeljack was there, still bent anxiously over his pad. “Hey,” Ratchet said, easing himself down. “You all right? What’s got you worried?”

Wheeljack paused and then he said, “Nothing, doc, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me, get some rest,” but while he was talking, he was taking one of his brand-new transmission shielders out from his side compartment, and he set it up between them and activated it, a flicker of a pink shield traveling out to create a secure bubble.

“What’s going on?” Ratchet said, stiffening: any new communications shielding technology was only good for about three uses against Soundwave, so if Wheeljack was blowing it now— “You worried about Prime and the others?” He rubbed a hand down his face. “I’d say I considered telling Megatron the nav drive had to take longer—but I’d be lying. Anyway, Hook’s too good, he’d know better.”

“We’ve got a different problem,” Wheeljack said ominously. “I can’t help you with the nav computer circuitry, and I’ve already finished patching up the engines, so I’ve been sitting around with some spare cycles on my hands...”

“Okay?” Ratchet said, prompting. That *was* a pretty reliable recipe for something to go either very wrong or very right, but Ratchet didn’t think Wheeljack had started cobbling together any new inventions in the back of Megatron’s cave. He hoped.

Wheeljack said, low, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell Ironhide, but I’m pretty sure Megatron’ll have Soundwave start poking through my brain before he gets to yours,” which was more than a little alarming. “I noticed there was something weird when we fired the thrusters. We had a harder time getting lift than I would’ve expected, given the curvature of the planet. Then I realized, we’ve been having a harder time *moving around* than I would’ve expected, given the curvature of the planet. Have *you* had to reorient your graviton systems?”

“No,” Ratchet said slowly, realizing. “I’m still aligned to Earth’s gravity.”

Wheeljack nodded. “Me too. But this whole planet is about half the size of *Cybertron*. We should all

be floating in mid-air with every step.”

“There’s some kind of super-dense core?”

Wheeljack silently handed over his pad. He’d sketched out roughly ten possible areas of explanation, noted some experimental results he’d expect to see with each of them, and then taken readings—radiation readings, examining data their scanners had picked up moving through the solar system—

“Stellar jackets are *theoretical*,” Ratchet said, less a disagreement than a protest, staring down at the implacable results. “Actually capturing the energy output of an entire *star*—”

“It’s not practical except in really limited conditions, yeah,” Wheeljack said. “Those conditions include the star being so small that in practice, it couldn’t capture enough material in its orbit to build the jacket with. But this one didn’t. It didn’t have to.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the cave mouth; the supergiant was rising outside right now. “Big brother took care of that. This is a binary star system. And *we’re* on the second star.”

It was almost impossible to believe, except the readings were just as impossible to explain any other way. Ratchet suddenly remembered Scrapper saying, all the way down in the recycling level, how he was getting inexplicable levels of solar radiation. “But *how*?”

Wheeljack spread out his hands. “I’m guessing the ancestors of these Makers probably evolved on a moon of that gas giant. They figured out space travel, and started mining the rest of their solar system, and once you’ve got that far—soon as you discover how to make durasteel and sixth-tier thermal transfer material, a stellar jacket’s not actually that *complicated*. It just takes time. Given the diameter of this star, I’d guess it was a hundred thousand years, start to finish. But you start capturing surplus energy above the running total cost of construction at less than 0.1% completion. They’d have been stupid *not* to jacket the star, even within organic lifespans.”

“How much...how much energy does this thing produce?” Ratchet said.

“It’s pretty much meaningless to talk about it in energon numbers,” Wheeljack said. “They’ve got a *star* in their fuel tank. Best guess, they capture more energy in a year than we blew in the entire war. You know that theory—”

“That Cybertron was initially fueled from a stellar jacket, when the star within started to become unstable,” Ratchet said.

“Yeah,” Wheeljack said. “It looks a lot more plausible to me right now. The Equatorial Passage through the planet, you know how it dumps out in that weird polished crater in Alpha Rota neighborhood? Well, I kinda noodled this up—” He reached out and flicked up another screen on the pad, a diagram showing how you’d build a cup of thin walls set into the crater’s massive bowl shape, and pour energy out of a jacketed star to funnel down into the Passage—which wasn’t really a tunnel at all, Ratchet realized instantly. It was a *pipeline*, a pipeline with tributaries going to every part of the planet, and a tidal wave of energon rushing down it would be captured all over by Cybertron’s quintillion hungry power sinks, filling them to the brim.

“Looks to me like all the heavy lifting is done, on both ends,” Wheeljack said. “The Constructicons, you know how fast they work—they could whip up that funnel in a couple of months. If Megatron built a space bridge to this system—brought Cybertron here, like he got it to Earth—”

“He could completely refuel the planet,” Ratchet said. “Almost instantly.”

“Yeah,” Wheeljack said. “Ratchet, we’ve got to get out of this system before he figures it out. At

least the Constructicons are all being run off their treads, but Megatron's not exactly a slouch himself when it comes to engineering. The more time he spends roaming around hitting energy sources and seeing how much power this planet has—he's going to start wondering where the hell it's all coming from. And if he asks Scrapper or Hook to sit down for a couple of hours and tell him—they're going to figure it out."

#

So Ratchet went back out to his next stint on the circuitry with a brand new anxiety routine stuck firmly on his secondary processors. It didn't get any better when Megatron and the others swooped back in triumphantly with a stack of energon cubes big enough to fully refuel the *Excelsior* ten times over. "Scrapper!" Megatron said. "Leave those hull reinforcements, I have something more important for you to work on for the moment. Find some way to compress the cubes further, and trade off filling speed if you have to: we're running out of carrying capacity before we're running out of time. And rip out every last unnecessary bulkhead. I mean to fill the entire hull of this ship top to bottom with energon before we leave," he added gloatingly, looking the *Excelsior* up and down, measuring it for space. Dammit.

And the worst thing was, Ratchet really *couldn't* go any faster. He badly wanted to push his next shift a little, but he'd been right when he'd told Megatron that was a bad idea, so he forced himself to stop after eight hours, right on schedule. He put down the transistor pen and rotated through his joints and shut his optics system off for a full lubrication cycle and a reboot before he sat down heavily against the hull. The Constructicons had been busy while he and Hook had been working: nearly the whole length of the ship was now wide open from the nose all the way back to the engine room, with barely a few areas still closed off. Ratchet could've lived without the reminder of just how damn *fast* they could work, especially on large-scale projects. Two months sounded like a serious overestimate to him.

Hook had got up for a break too, and he'd gone to get one of the energon cubes; he actually grudgingly brought one over to Ratchet and held it out with a cold, imperious air. "We need you working at capacity, Autobot," he said.

"Thanks," Ratchet said, figuring he'd answer the gesture and not the words. The fuel did make him feel better: hard not to feel better when your system was used to sitting at low-level fuel panic all the time and it suddenly went away. The energon was fantastically good, too. The cube technology the Decepticons had created was designed to massively compress incredibly crude sources, and they didn't waste energy on filtering it, so normally it tasted pretty much like toxic sludge—Ratchet forced himself to gulp down captured cubes when he had the chance just like the rest of the Autobots, but whoof, it was tough going—but this stuff was so clean that the compression actually made it taste better, because it concentrated the handful of trace elements to give it a little flavor and zing. It was hard not to gulp it.

Hook *had* gulped it, a bit, and it apparently made him feel chatty. He blurted abruptly, "And you've *really* kept the Oath. The entire war."

"I've kept it since I took it. Eleven million, seven hundred thirty-eight thousand, one hundred twelve years, to be exact. Yep." Ratchet looked over at Hook. "A lot of medics used to take it, you know," he said softly.

"Yes, and most of them dropped it like an overheated welding block when the war started," Hook said.

Ratchet shrugged. "That's their business. Mintarian ethics aren't really big on worrying about what other mechs are doing."

“I notice it didn’t stop you taking *sides*,” Hook said, flicking out a finger to ping hard against the Autobot symbol on Ratchet’s chest.

It was a hell of a fair point. “Yeah,” Ratchet said softly, looking down, and rubbing his thumb over the symbol. “I thought...there was a side worth being on.”

Hook darted a sideways look at him. “And *now*?”

“Well, your side sure isn’t, but mine’s not looking too hot either,” Ratchet said. “I was thinking maybe I’d—”

“Let me guess, start a *clinic* on Cybertron somewhere?” Hook said. “The preferred suicide method of Autobot medics? I’ve never understood, why don’t you just go jump in a reactor instead and save the effort.”

“Old habits die hard, I guess,” Ratchet said dryly. He sighed. Hook was right, actually, which made it a tough sell. He *wasn’t* suicidal. Actually, he wasn’t even depressed at the moment, although he still didn’t know why *not*. “I’ll talk to Optimus before I decide anything. Maybe the humans would let me build a neutral facility on Earth instead.”

“Why do you insist on making things difficult for yourself, really?” Hook said with an exasperated gesture, waving his arms: more than half his cube had gone down. “Does it satisfy some primitive baseline-level routine you never got adjusted or something? Isn’t it far simpler to look at the universe as it is, instead of the way you imagine it should be, and act accordingly?”

Ratchet tipped his head back and sighed. “Hook! We’re *medics*! We *fix things*. What else is that but looking at the universe and imagining it better? When I fix something, I want it to *stay* fixed, and I’d rather it didn’t get broken in the first place, so I can spend the time fixing something *else*. Far as I can see, *you’re* the one making things difficult for yourself, helping Megatron smash things left and right.”

“Only if they’re things I *want* to keep functioning.”

“Well, I want all sentient beings to keep functioning, if I can do anything about it,” Ratchet said. “That’s my baseline-level routine, and *no*, I *don’t* want it adjusted. Keeping the Oath of Mintar isn’t hard for me, it just makes sense. I’m a *neurosurgeon*. You think I could get even Autobots to let me in their deep circuitry if they didn’t trust me completely?”

“Ugh,” Hook said, with a groan. “Now you’re just parroting the *drivel* from that introduction to Advanced Neurosurgery Techniques—‘to be truly effective the neurophysician must first establish absolute trust,’ and all that blather about ‘treat any patient who comes to your hands to the full limit of your capacity, without permitting any influence from the thought of consequences or self-interest’—absolute *garbage*.”

“Ouch,” Ratchet said. “Sorry you didn’t like it.”

“What?” Hook paused, about to take another gulp, and frowned at him.

Ratchet shrugged. “I wrote it.”

“You—you—” Hook sputtered out to a total halt and just sat there almost inert for thirty-nine astroseconds, obviously yanking up the full text from deep storage and looking it over, probably diving into the demonstration modules; any surgeon as good as Hook was could easily tell apart the work of other surgeons, and he’d seen plenty of Ratchet’s work in the field to compare to. “You’re Inscriptus of Iacon?” Hook said after a moment. “You’re *Inscriptus of Iacon*. *You’re*—but he *died*,

he died at...the Spire..." Hook trailed off, staring at him.

Ratchet looked down at his hands. "Everyone else in my neurotrauma ward died that day," he said softly. "The other surgeons, the staff, the patients...I dug most of them out myself. And the hospital was destroyed. So after the search for survivors wound up, I went to Central Command and asked to be sent to an active battle zone as a medic. They wouldn't do it. They tried to put me on some council of technical advisers. So I headed to an outpost on the front directly and gave the name Ratchet. He was one of our orderlies. Got used to it pretty soon. It feels more like my name now than the old one."

"Oh," Hook said after a moment. He looked down at his half-empty cube like he was wondering if he was experiencing reality distortions, and then he tipped it up and swigged the rest of it away in several long gulps. He put it down empty. After a few minutes he added, "The introduction is still idiotic."

Ratchet choked out a laugh. "Can't please everybody, I guess."

#

It hadn't ever been much of a secret, as far as Ratchet was concerned. He'd more or less avoided telling people for a couple of millennia into the war, and after that none of the other Autobots had cared anymore. He hadn't figured the Decepticons would care either. Didn't seem like they would've actually trusted him or any Autobot physicians these days no matter what. But they'd all been listening in to him and Hook, it turned out, and apparently it *did* make a difference, because Ratchet had barely finished his own energon before Thundercracker had casually wandered over and said something or other about how he was having a little trouble with a rear thruster, except when Ratchet took him back into one of the few rooms the Constructicons hadn't knocked down, what he was *actually* having trouble with was an absolutely monstrous loop of doubt and unhappiness that had been stuck in his background memory for more than *five million years*.

"Ouch," Ratchet said, cringing involuntarily just looking at it. "Thundercracker, this needs *major* intervention. Getting it out is going to take six surgeries spaced over four days, in a real infirmary. With total sedation for the three hours between the third and fourth, because you'll be actively self-destructive for that period. It'll get better after that," he added.

"I can't do that!" Thundercracker said. "Four days in an infirmary? What do you think I'm gonna do, check myself into the Ark?"

"Yep, that's exactly what you're going to do," Ratchet said. "Get yourself captured the next time you have a chance, and I'll do the surgery while you're in custody."

"Is that supposed to be funny or something?"

"Not even a little," Ratchet said. "Optimus will let you out afterwards, I'll talk to him. What, you don't believe Autobots could be that dumb? Because trust me, we sure can. And you'd better do it soon," he added. "This thing looks like it's on the verge of crossing over into your *foreground* memory, and once that's happening, you'll start getting interference with primary function. Things like losing track of what you were in the middle of, forgetting where you are, having trouble with decision-making. Seriously bad stuff."

Thundercracker flinched, which probably meant he'd actually *started* having some of those symptoms, and muttered something not-entirely-committal. Ratchet shook his head. "I'm going to disrupt the top layers of it—should slow down the progression for a month or two, and give you a little bit of relief—but it's only going to be a temporary effect, and it can't be repeated or it'll

accelerate the progression instead. Make *absolutely sure* you get a decent defrag cycle once every Cybertronian day from now until you get to my table.”

After Thundercracker slunk out, Ratchet didn't even have time to put away his neural scanner before Ravage came padding in, so silently he nearly made Ratchet fall over windmilling back when he jumped up unexpectedly onto the table he was using for exams. Ravage also wouldn't exactly say what was wrong, but a few questions and a little guessing got Ratchet to the problem: it wasn't having been caught and shoved into the recycling center yesterday, which had been his first suspicion; it was from the first time they'd all been caught. “You were in Soundwave's subspace compartment,” Ratchet said slowly. “The nanites couldn't reach you. *Your* emotional systems weren't offline. But his were. And when you communicated distress, he—didn't respond. Like...like he didn't care.”

Ravage didn't say anything, but his joints all tightened. “Right,” Ratchet said. He'd never been entirely sure what the relationship was there: Soundwave had obviously figured out a way to spark each of the cassettes a new consciousness off his own core, and was using himself as a kind of scaffolding for them while they finished developing. That sounded incredibly intimate to him, as close as any organic parent and their biological offspring. But Decepticons didn't admit the existence of love as an emotion any sentient being whatsoever could sincerely feel, so he didn't know where that left them.

Apparently, neither did *Ravage*, and even though he clearly didn't *really* buy the party line, he also clearly didn't want to ask Soundwave directly and risk getting an answer he didn't like. Looked like he'd been deliberately kicking the uncertainty subroutine out of his conscious processing every time it intruded, probably for the entire duration of his lifespan. So of course it had brewed up a big tangled knot of cross-blocked processes several layers down, and the trauma of having been given what felt like confirmation of the awful possibility had triggered the soupy mess of it all and was letting things come floating up.

Ratchet rubbed his jaw, trying to think his way through it. If he'd been working on an Autobot patient, he'd have worked his way down to find the origin of the doubt, which would've been a transistor switching on an irrational pattern, and fixed it; then he would've kicked the whole mess and ordered them to spend a couple days resting, and after that they would've been fine. But there wasn't anything irrational about the underlying doubt here. Ratchet himself had no idea if Soundwave loved Ravage or not. And there was no way to tell, because Soundwave could certainly lie about it in a completely undetectable way.

“Look,” Ratchet said finally, “I can program you a responsive subroutine for it. Up to you whether you want to integrate it.” Ravage cocked his head, waiting. “Here's the underlying principle: there's no point asking because you can't ever be sure of whatever answer you might get. On the one side there's the concern process that you've been spawning, but on the other, if Soundwave actually does feel—a responsibility for your development,” damn, having to tiptoe around normal vocabulary for this was awkward, “he might want to communicate the exact opposite if he thought, for instance, that would increase your independence.” Ravage's eyes glowed virulently red as he sat with that a moment. “So any communicated answer of any kind is meaningless. The only thing that you can rely on is concrete actions. Right? So if you want, I can give you an evaluator function you can run at will that will process your last, oh, five million physical-world interactions, combine it with historical data, and let you calculate a weighted probabilistic answer based on your own criteria.”

The evaluator took about half an hour to work up. Ratchet wasn't completely sure how well it would work, but Ravage took it, integrated it in about fifteen seconds, put himself into a rest cycle for ten minutes to run the evaluator for the first time, and sat up with the whole messy process knot dropped like Scavenger had just gone in there and manually scooped it out of his lower processing levels.



Ravage stretched his back and forelegs and went padding back out of the room without so much as a word. Oh, Decepticons.

And then Long Haul sidled in.

By the time Ratchet sent Long Haul on his way, he'd figured it out: Decepticons were a suspicious bunch, but they *loved* hierarchy. They didn't have much respect for a random Autobot medic—most of them didn't have the technical knowledge to evaluate his work for themselves, and what they knew of medics in general was being slapped together under fire and tied up with string. Inscriptus of Iacon—well, actually the name probably didn't mean a thing to them directly, but they'd noticed it *did* mean something to Hook, and from there it was only one fast lookup to a historical databank and all of a sudden Ratchet went from being a two-bit medic who patched up their enemies to one of the acknowledged greatest healers of the Golden Age.

He sighed a bit. He'd never liked the hoopla to begin with: it had snuck up on him little by little over his first million years without him noticing, because he'd been busy doing the work that had built his reputation, and then he'd written his book because he couldn't take on all the medics who increasingly kept asking to study with him, and then suddenly people wanted him to come give talks and lectures all over the planet, and it had taken him ten thousand years to learn which ones were actually worth doing because he'd be talking to medics who were actually going to use his advice, and which ones were a pointless waste of time because he'd be talking to laymen who just wanted some weird sense of glamour. Decepticons weren't the *only* ones who liked hierarchy.

And—to give the Decepticons credit, if they'd looked at that historical record, they'd also found out that he'd resigned his senior fellow position at the grande-dame institution of First Iacon Medcenter and walked straight out, the same day the directors had voted to start transferring all Decepticon patients to Mercy of Polyhex.

At the time, he'd just considered it a grotesquely misguided decision. The official rationale had been that the physicians in Polyhex specialized in Decepticon patients, they'd do a better job. He'd shown up at every single hearing the directors held and argued his vocal unit to exhaustion pointing out that no possible specialization could outweigh the chances of deterioration during transport and the loss of faith created by having a segregated system. He'd said instead they ought to hire more Decepticon specialists. The directors had told him they couldn't find First Iacon-caliber specialists. All the more reason not to send patients *away*, in his mind.

Back then, he'd thought that it was simply sad, awful prejudice, based on complaints coming from Autobot patients made fretful and unjust because they were in pain themselves, and from a handful of bad-apple physicians who didn't want the hassle of loud angry Decepticon patients. But now, he suddenly remembered that two of the directors had been on the Council of Elders, too. They'd probably...they'd probably *known*.

The directors had tried to placate him. While the discussions had still been dragging on, they'd built a beautiful new neurosurgery ward complete with brand-new equipment and palatial offices; they'd arranged for him to have multiple assistants, increased his budget, his staff—they'd made it a magnificent place to work, given him everything he'd needed to do his best for his patients. And they'd quietly passed the resolution early one morning at a special session convened without warning while he'd actually been *in* surgery, like they were trying to give him an excuse to let it slide by. He'd finished up the operation without knowing; afterwards, washing up, he'd done a quick poll of the hospital news feed and saw it tucked in as an abbreviated line item after a different vote on changing the energon supplier for the senior staff lounge.

He'd immediately sent in his resignation, broadcast in the clear on the hospital-wide channel, and

he'd walked straight out with half of his tools still covered with lubricant. And he'd done it because he'd known that there was no damn way any Decepticon patient who ever landed on his table could ever trust him again if he stayed at a hospital that had thrown them out.

Well, no Decepticons had trusted him to treat them for the last eight million years anyway, but apparently, he'd been right in the long run. That was something, maybe.

Of course—what he'd done after that was go to Iacon Central, which at the time had been an upstart new-bot-on-the-block hospital with a shoestring budget, and he'd offered to build them a brand new neurotrauma center, specializing in damage resulting from violence, on the condition that they never shut their doors to Decepticons. Otherwise, he'd said, he was going to Mercy of Polyhex. The directors there had smiled and nodded, agreeing to everything he wanted. They'd told him they respected his commitment to professional ethics, and while he'd been standing there, they'd formally brought up their own motion to clear out Decepticon patients and voted it down.

He'd spent the next fifty thousand years shuttling around all those stupid pointless talks just to raise money for the new ward. And all the while, underground, under his feet...He'd treated maybe half a million Decepticons over those millennia. How many had been dissected into the spare parts below? Ten times as many? Enough to make Megatron himself so sick with rage that he'd blown an important operation and nearly buried himself and his soldiers alive, just to eradicate the facility.

Well, no matter the exact number, Ratchet figured he had a long way to go to catch up, so he might as well take the chance to get started now. "Come on in," he said, as Starscream stalked into the room just short of having smoke coming out of his afterburners.

"Whatever you did to me, it's stopped working!" he snapped. "Fix it *now*, or I'll take apart your *brilliant* circuitry one chip at a time."

"The subroutine kicked in again?" Ratchet said, ignoring the threat; high-ranking Decepticons all seemed to have an overpowered ambition module that made them want to be the masters of any situation they found themselves in, and Starscream's was obviously hyperactive to an extreme. "Lie down and let me take a look. When did you start getting symptoms?" He abruptly remembered the weird way Starscream had reacted to Megatron's near-death experience. "Were you feeling the effects when we were taking the Excelsior?"

"I wasn't *afraid* of those tractables, if that's what you're asking," Starscream hissed.

"Hm," Ratchet said, poking around; he couldn't actually see the subroutine running anywhere at the moment. "What about the raid just now? Were you in an enclosed area?"

"What? No," Starscream said. "These pathetic Makers have almost no aerial defenses at all. We found a power switching station on the outskirts of a city on the southwest edge of the mountains, smashed their meager resistance, and took as much energon as we could carry before we left. It barely merited being called a *raid* at all. Hardly a challenging target. If *I'd* been in charge—"

He cut himself off and shrugged angrily. His reflexes were so fast that if Ratchet hadn't literally been monitoring his neural pathways, he would've lumped the two actions into one, but they weren't a single impulse. The subroutine had momentarily woken up, kicked Starscream's motivator, which had locked up his vocal unit, and then he'd shrugged afterwards to cover it up.

But the subroutine *wasn't* stuck. It was actually dropping out of memory on its own again, even as Ratchet watched. It was just—kicking in repeatedly? Often enough to *feel* stuck, even though it wasn't. A quick skim of the diagnostic logs confirmed the suspicion, but that left Ratchet with the question what was making it kick in.

And then he realized it was barely a question at all. “This started at Priatol City,” Ratchet said. “When Megatron destroyed Priatol City.”

Starscream scowled at him. “Don’t be stupid. I don’t get frightened by loud explosions like some Autobot.”

Ratchet blew out some exhaust. The problem was actually pretty obvious: Starscream’s ambition module and high risk tolerance had spent the last several million years in a carefully balanced dance with his panic subroutine and his logic center, a dance which produced the Decepticon leadership status quo where Starscream tried for a coup once in a while when a decent opportunity seemed to afford itself, but just as quickly pulled back into the useful second-in-command when Megatron rounded on him—biding his time for the next chance.

And then two days ago, Starscream had watched Megatron level a city single-handed. His subroutine had obviously processed that data and decided that rebelling against Megatron was in fact a phenomenally bad idea guaranteed to result in Starscream’s death, and as a result it was now attacking his ambition module’s every flicker of life. He was getting jolted with fear every time he so much as thought about trying to overthrow Megatron, and since that probably consumed roughly seventy percent of his waking moments, it was no wonder he felt like the subroutine was stuck again.

But Ratchet didn’t know what to do about it. Starscream’s subroutine wasn’t operating incorrectly or on bad data. In fact, there was a good case to be made that the unhealthy operation had been the previous state. It really was amazing Starscream hadn’t annoyed Megatron into obliterating him before now.

And that was exacerbating the problem, Ratchet realized. Starscream had probably convinced himself that Megatron didn’t go ahead and destroy him because Megatron didn’t want to risk an all-out battle to the death with his deadly Air Commander, something grandiose like that. Now he couldn’t slip that past his own logic center anymore, and it had become agonizingly clear to him on at least some level that Megatron was *tolerating* his rebellions, presumably because Starscream made himself adequately useful the rest of the time. The massive condescension of it was probably driving Starscream nuts when his panic subroutine wasn’t jabbing him.

It wasn’t a totally unfamiliar problem to Ratchet: there *were* Autobots with overactive ambition modules. It wasn’t as common as among Decepticons, but they were out there. The Matrix was really helpful for most of them, a tangible symbol that kept them comfortable taking orders from the bearer, and Optimus had a gentle hand on the reins, too. Mostly the energy went into squabbling *under* his authority, with other officers, and Optimus was a genius at bringing squabbling Autobots together at the end of the day. The handful of times that someone hadn’t been able to accept his command, or hadn’t been able to let him guide them to compromise with the rest of the officers, and it had got to the point of distress, Ratchet had quietly had a word with Optimus, and he’d given that Autobot an independent operation or command somewhere relatively autonomous where they didn’t have to get their face rubbed in higher authority all the time.

But all of those solutions depended primarily not on the mech, but on their *leader*. What was Ratchet going to do, roll up to Megatron and ask him to think about how sad it was making Starscream that his dream of killing Megatron and seizing supreme power wasn’t going to work out? Yeah, that was going to go great. For that matter, it might be a bad idea to even tell Starscream what was wrong. Right now, the subroutine was making him feel uncomfortable, but if he was forced to *consciously* face his powerlessness, his ambition module would stall out completely, and he’d probably drop into a severe depression. A high-powered ambition module grabbed so much of the emotional system that other sources of emotional pleasure often atrophied. In fact, as far as Ratchet could tell, Starscream didn’t have *any* other active sources of emotional pleasure.

He rubbed his jaw. “Well, it’s not stuck,” he said after a moment, cautiously: he wasn’t going to lie to Starscream, but he sure was going to pick his words, and buy himself some time to think it through. “It *has* gotten hypersensitive—looks like it’s being triggered in a lot of situations where it would previously stay dormant. But I can’t excise it from your system, or you’ll end up getting yourself killed.” By Megatron, almost certainly. “The most common treatment for a hypersensitive subroutine is gradual desensitization, but that might not be a good idea in this case. I’d like to run a trace on it for a few days and get detailed statistical information before I try to come up with a treatment plan. Will you consent?”

Starscream hated not walking out with his problem solved, and also having to give consent, so he did it as fast as possible so he wouldn’t have to acknowledge he was doing it, and then shot out of the room.

Ratchet gave it another half-hour after him, but nobody else popped in—he would’ve liked to believe that meant none of the other Decepticons were toting around severe neurotrauma, but he was betting they just weren’t having severe enough daily symptoms yet to drive them to his table. So he took a rest cycle himself, and even cautiously tried a ten-minute light defrag cycle, which went about as well as he could’ve expected: he woke up after six minutes with a gasping jerk out of a sensory dump of Optimus firmly pushing him into the dirt underneath Priatol City in Straxus’ place, telling him that he’d failed in his oath, so now he had to stay here, and the dirt stopped being dirt and turned into spare parts, Decepticon parts. Ratchet was pretty glad to get up and go back out to work.

He finished up another eight-hour shift and then tucked himself away for yet another rest cycle, the prescription he’d have given any other mech with a heavy subconscious load going. Afterwards, he made himself run another ten-minute defrag cycle. This one turned into him desperately working on drive circuitry that was going all wrong while out in the distance Megatron was glowing incandescent white, and he was going to blast the Spire if Ratchet didn’t get it done quicker, but he *couldn’t*—Ratchet struggled the whole way through the defrag without canceling out, although he did lie flat panting for five minutes when it finished, and he needed another rest cycle after just to give his overheating circuits a little more downtime.

He was near the tail end of the next shift when Megatron and his crew sailed back in with another load of energon. It happened in background sensory data because he was concentrating on the drive circuitry, and when he finally stretched up out of the work, there was already a big glowing mass of energon cubes stacked floor-to-ceiling at the back of the *Excelsior*. Megatron was standing frowning at it heavily. Thundercracker and Skywarp were still boasting to the Constructicons how easy it had been to get the stuff. “It’s like a joke,” Thundercracker said, sounding gleeful—he was probably a little high thanks to having the top layers of that monster doubt process disrupted. “This recharge bank we hit, there were *two hundred charging stations*.”

“We started filling cubes at one, they tried coming at us there, we’d just take off and go to another one,” Skywarp said, grinning. “We ran those loser mechs off their feet. It was great. Right, Screamer?”

Starscream didn’t answer. He’d parked himself in the chair at the new frontal viewport—that had appeared sometime in this last shift too, Scrapper hard at work—and was stewing again. He was probably starting to slip into depression already thanks to the subroutine kicking his ambition module constantly.

“Yeah, it’s nuts, it’s like they’ve got it just coming out of the ground triple-refined,” Thundercracker said, and laughed.

Ratchet tried not to flinch; he met Wheeljack’s eyes across the room and they exchanged a grim look.

He looked down at the drive circuitry: yep, it was still going to be another four days. Megatron was still standing there surveying his energon with that frowning expression. Ratchet figured anything that distracted him from that line of thought was probably good, so he walked over to him. “Megatron,” he said, getting his attention. “I’d like to keep one of the rooms that haven’t been knocked down yet for an infirmary. I’ve been using one off the back corridor.”

“Show me,” Megatron said, an unexpected bonus. Ratchet led him back to the chamber. Megatron didn’t just take a look, he actually came inside, and after the door slid closed behind them, he turned and frowned down at Ratchet.

Ratchet had to work not to stare. He was pretty familiar with that look, but he hadn’t really expected it from *Megatron*. “Those back plates showing signs of damage at all?” he asked after a blinking moment, figuring that it was going to take a pretty long ramp-up to get to whatever the real issue was.

Megatron made a gesture of impatience. “Look at them as long as I’m here,” he said, and sat down to put his back in reach. But Ratchet hadn’t even gotten out a tool before Megatron said abruptly, “What’s wrong with Starscream, and can you do anything about it?”

Ratchet was glad Megatron’s back was to him, because it meant he didn’t have to fight to keep himself from gawking. It hadn’t occurred to him that Megatron would even notice, much less *care*—far as Megatron would see, Starscream should’ve just been unusually obedient and a lot less mouthy. Ratchet said slowly, “What are the symptoms you’ve seen?” He picked up a high-res magnifier and started going over the plates looking for stress fractures to play for time.

“He’s being obedient and respectful,” Megatron said.

“Uh,” Ratchet said. “You want me to *fix* that?”

Megatron actually turned around to glare at him. “If I wanted an obedient and respectful second-in-command, why the hell would I have *Starscream* in that position?”

“Fair point,” Ratchet managed, but he knew he was still staring.

Megatron snorted, turning back around. “Do you think I need my soldiers to fawn and pule over me the way you Autobots do over Optimus Prime? I’d be nauseated. I don’t need Starscream to *love* me. I need him to be brilliant, determined, and ruthless, and if that comes with ambition and disrespect, so be it. I’m more than capable of keeping him within the bounds I require.”

“All right then,” Ratchet said, blankly.

“Well?” Megatron said.

“Give me a minute to re-evaluate,” Ratchet said. “And raise your left arm to a thirty-eight degree angle.” The plates had held up incredibly well: turned out they were coated with thin sacrificial layers of supersolids that took a hell of a lot of energy to melt. The fire had vaporized about three layers down, but there were plenty left. He’d only found one small fracture, at the lower edge of the arm plate. Megatron lifted it, and Ratchet worked on it with a bonder while he let his processor churn away on the problem.

Normally, it would’ve been a straightforward answer: he would’ve said he didn’t discuss patients, and Megatron would’ve either slagged him or not. But he wasn’t sure he could think of any way to treat Starscream *without* Megatron’s involvement. He just wouldn’t have thought he could *get* it, or at least not to produce any kind of result that Starscream would’ve wanted. But apparently—

apparently what Megatron wanted was for Starscream to be who he was. Well. Who he *had* been.

Ratchet put down the bonder and stepped back. Megatron turned around on the table to face him, eyes narrowed, waiting. Ratchet said slowly, “Some kinds of experiences—some kinds of data—have a disproportionate effect on our personalities. It’s usually direct sensory input rather than secondhand, but either way it’s a piece of data that our information processing systems flag with a high accuracy value. If something like that comes in and it literally can’t be integrated with our existing evaluation functions—something has to give.”

“Get to the *point* already,” Megatron said.

“Starscream’s never seen you use that weapon before, has he?” Ratchet said.

Megatron’s face set into hard lines. “No.”

“Yeah,” Ratchet said. “It was pretty impressive. Even for someone who’s done his very best to not be overly impressed by you.”

Megatron was silent a moment. “Can you remove the event from his memory?” he said finally.

Ratchet snorted. “You want a *delusional* second-in-command who can’t accurately process reality? No.” He hesitated and said tentatively, “You know—we’re not all happy singing harmony in the Ark all the time.” Megatron looked over at him. “Sometimes...somebody’s better off in a more autonomous position.”

“Give Starscream an independent command? If it weren’t increasingly clear that you’re congenitally disordered when it comes to anyone who’s *on your table*,” Megatron knocked one knuckle against it with a clang, “I’d consider that a devious attempt to destabilize my entire army. No. Starscream is a tactical genius, and a strategic idiot. He’s constantly fixated on short-term satisfaction. As my second, and in the active field of battle, he’s priceless. As an independent commander, a disaster.”

“Hmm,” Ratchet said, rubbing his jaw. “Send him to Shockwave?”

Megatron actually laughed. “Shockwave hasn’t done anything to be punished for, but I’ll keep it in reserve.” He cocked his head. “Does it *occur* to you that you’re advising me on Decepticon assignments? It’s a peculiar thing for an Autobot to do.”

Ratchet threw up his hands. “Sure it occurs to me. You think I *like* the idea of Starscream roaming the galaxy on an independent mission to demonstrate he’s as good as you? Primus only knows what he’d destroy. But I don’t allow external considerations to influence my recommendations for treatment.” He dropped his hands and sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know that any of that would work, anyway. Fundamentally, he’s got to establish a completely new equilibrium state for his personality. And it’s not going to look like the old one.”

Megatron scowled. “How long is it going to take?”

Ratchet hesitated, and then he said quietly, “It’s not a question of *when*. He’s got...a ten percent chance of making it. Maybe less.”

“*What?* Because he *watched* me fire a weapon? Don’t be absurd.”

Ratchet shrugged a little, helplessly. “Megatron, in case you haven’t noticed, Starscream’s built his entire existence around you. Actually, he’d probably *also* fall apart if he ever actually managed to kill you.”

“If Starscream ever killed me, he’d throw an extremely elaborate coronation party,” Megatron said. “I know in detail. He’s left *sketches* for it around occasionally.”

“Sure,” Ratchet said. “He’d stick a crown on his head and prance around for a week, maybe a month, and then he’d notice his life had no meaning anymore. *You’re* the one with a purpose. He just wants to beat *you*.”

Megatron glowered at him, but he didn’t actually argue. He got up and walked out instead. Ratchet followed him back into the wide-open bay; Megatron frowned at Starscream’s still-hunched back with an expression of deep irritation, then took a long look back at the rising mountain of cubes. “Scrapper!” he said. “What’s the state of our defenses?”

“We’re in reasonably good shape,” Scrapper said. “We’ve built a solid perimeter of defensive mines and laser emplacements out for half a mile, and planted those communications-interference pylons Soundwave wanted at the ten mile mark, all around. We’ll have clear warning of any oncoming assault, and the perimeter should hold them off long enough for us to deploy the ship’s engines. We won’t have warp available until the navigational computer is done, but we can get ourselves into space.”

“Good,” Megatron said. “Then we’re taking the rest of the day off. Straxus deserves a wake, and we’re going to give him one.”

“Oh, boy,” Ratchet said under his breath.

#

“You’ve *gotta* be kiddin’ me,” Ironhide said. “Hell, no.”

“I don’t know where you’ve picked up this idea that I’m offering you *options*,” Megatron said, plunking down another energon cube in front of him.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Ratchet said, staring at the extremely large cube in front of him. It was glowing the deep blue-green of quintuple-refined energon.

“I don’t care,” Megatron said. “If my soldiers are going to be drunk, *so are you*.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for *them*, either!”

“You know, I’m having a really weird time on this planet,” Bumblebee said abruptly. He picked up the cube in front of him—with an effort; it was roughly the size of his head—and glugged down a good quarter of the thing, then put it down and belched so loudly the Decepticons actually looked vaguely impressed.

“Look at the runt go,” Thundercracker said bemusedly, and raised his own cube. “Hail, Straxus!”

Ratchet tried to stick to small sips, counting each one, but he lost track somewhere after the first hour of toasts—Megatron’s cold eye stayed on them all to make sure they were drinking along with each one—and the next time he remembered he wasn’t planning to drink much, he was swallowing a big mouthful, his head was full of a beautiful cloudy sparkling sensation as all his circuitry tried to go off at once, and he didn’t remember *why* he hadn’t planned on drinking much; this felt *great*.

Soundwave had dredged up some old miner’s song that Straxus had used to like, and Ironhide was singing along with it, swaying back and forth; most of his cube was gone. Bumblebee had tipped over halfway through his cube and was on his side smiling beatifically out at the universe. Brawn had drunk his entire cube in one long pull right at the start, then folded his arms and sat glaring across

the room at Megatron, showing absolutely no effects, until five minutes ago he'd fallen over straight into a rock-solid rest cycle.

"Man, ishs good—good shtuff," Scavenger said. "An' so—so—*mush* of it. Wh..where d'yuh think it—it comes from?" Nobody answered him, and he tipped his cube back for the dregs.

Most of the Decepticons were well into their second cube. Megatron, reclining like an emperor at the head of the room, had gotten to number four himself, and even he was looking pretty blurry. He polished it off and tossed the disintegrating casing aside and sighed audibly, shifting his weight until he was sprawled deeply.

Ravage had been steadily lapping energon from a cube at Soundwave's side the whole time; he lifted his head and looked over. After a moment he got up and padded over to Megatron and pushed his head against Megatron's hand.

Megatron stroked him, twice, and then turned his hand over. Ratchet didn't quite get what they were doing, until next to him Wheeljack said suddenly, "Uh, are they—" in a rising, faintly shocked voice, and Ratchet looked again and realized, yep, they were *interfacing*, right *there*; Megatron had opened an access port and let Ravage *in*, and then Skywarp gulped the last of his cube and leaned over and put a hand on Megatron's other arm, and Megatron reached out and gripped his neck, gave him a friendly shake and then let *him*—

"Oh," Wheeljack said, stifled. "His *processor*—" and even through the glittering haze, Ratchet got it and found himself getting mortifyingly hot. It wouldn't be just the usual weird sensation of interfacing, somewhere between thrilling and embarrassing, having someone else's thoughts and processes wandering through your brain or vice versa, the funny tickling experience of running on other hardware. Plugging into Megatron meant access to his massively overpowered processor. It would be like—having your entire brain temporarily enlarged.

Then Scrapper got up, and that was when Ratchet realized in growing horror, Megatron was going to let *all* of them—

"What're they doin'?" Ironhide said blearily, frowning puzzled across the room.

"I—I think maybe we should go," Ratchet said, and tried to stand up. He collapsed back down as his leg servos reversed direction three times in confusion. "Ouf," he wheezed.

"Hey, are they *interfacing*?" Bumblebee said suddenly. He was still lying sideways.

"What, out in th' open?" Ironhide said. "Bumblebee, that's just rude." Then he paused and said, "What *are* they doin'?"

"They're interfacing," Wheeljack said in a stifled voice. Thundercracker and Hook had both gone up too. Skywarp had already staggered a few steps away with his optics shining painfully bright and fallen over into a rest cycle, and Ravage got up and padded away and curled up behind Soundwave's chair.

"Huh?" Ironhide said, staring bewildered up. "Which of 'em with who else?"

"All of them with—Megatron," Ratchet said. Megatron had sprawled even more deeply. His own optics were glowing dark subdued red, and he'd opened more access ports; he was letting them come at him all over. It was agonizingly embarrassing and Ratchet couldn't stop *watching*. All the Decepticons were crowding around Megatron, reaching for him, touching him; one by one they took turns plugging into him, and one by one they staggered away and collapsed with dazed ecstatic



faces. The only one who didn't move was Starscream, hunched down the other end of the room with less than a tenth of a single cube drunk, staring with angry misery into the glowing depths.

It went on for a while. Ratchet gave up trying to leave because his legs just weren't going to cooperate, and he started taking gulps of the rest of his cube instead to hurry up his own oncoming stupor. Ironhide sat next to him muttering into his own energon about sleazy Decepticons and how he'd always known Megatron was made of warped metal and how he'd never seen anything like it except for this time on the Antares 11 outpost, and then his chin sank the rest of the way down onto his chest and his system went into rest mode. Bumblebee made a few random comments about the orgy, all, "Wouldn't it be uncomfortable having that many people running on your hardware," and "Do you think they do this all the time," which actually, Ratchet was pretty sure they *did*; not one of the Decepticons had looked at all shocked. Eventually Bumblebee faded out too.

Wheeljack was tensed up and staring into his cube with his shoulders pulled in so tight it looked like he was in the middle of transforming. He kept darting short guilty looks up at Megatron that Ratchet only sluggishly realized were *longing*. But after the first surprise, he realized of course Wheeljack wanted in; he was processor-bound himself. He was constantly begging time on Teletran-1's systems to run complicated analyses. Ratchet reached out and clumsily patted his shoulder in sympathy. Wheeljack shook his head and then poured the rest of his cube straight down his throat and lay down on the floor and forced himself into rest mode with a manual shutdown he'd be very sorry for in the morning.

Ratchet was almost completely out himself when it wound down. The last of the Decepticons had moved away. Soundwave had silently come up to Megatron's left side near the end, and they'd interfaced a long time, Megatron's hand around the back of Soundwave's head, an intimate conversation between old friends, while three other Decepticons plugged into his right arm and thigh and side ports. One after another they pulled off and found empty spots on the floor to drift into dreamy rest. Finally Soundwave too got up and went to lie down with Ravage and Rumble, and left him alone.

Ratchet had finally gotten through the energized-circuit stage and was about to sink into rest mode too. And then Megatron stretched his whole length, sighing deeply, rotating joints, and said, low and commanding, "Starscream."

Starscream jerked and looked up at him, wary; and then he stared: Megatron crooked a finger. "Come here," he said.

"Wh-what?" Starscream stammered. "I—I don't, that's—you know I don't—"

"You do now," Megatron said. "*Come here.*"

Starscream darted a look at the exit ramp. Ratchet's processor started trying to parse the input, and a faint muffled alarm started down at the very lowest levels of consciousness, telling him he needed to *do something*.

Megatron just laughed out loud. "What, are you going to *run away*?" he jeered. "Do you really think you can't handle it, when the lowest Decepticon warrior can? Perhaps I *should* obliterate you, if you're really that pathetic."

Starscream shot to his feet almost shaking, his hands clenched. "Can't *handle* it?" he shrilled. "*You're* the one who never plugs in—"

"Well, perhaps *I* do now," Megatron said, his voice low and heavy and insinuating, and abruptly he slid all his access ports shut, one after another, and slowly, deliberately got to his feet. Starscream

was staring at him, open-mouthed, with a kind of shocked fascination; then he jumped and started backing away when Megatron came towards him, but not fast enough; his back hit the wall of the chamber, and Megatron had his hands planted on either side of Starscream's head, and he said softly, "Well, Air Commander? *Open up.*"

Starscream was staring open-mouthed up at Megatron. Ratchet's information systems had finally made some sense out of the incoming data, and his flailing motivator started helplessly thrashing trying to figure out what there was to do, and then Starscream turned his face to the side suddenly like he couldn't bear to watch and opened an access panel right in the middle of his torso. Instantly, Megatron slid out a connector from his own chest, a thin bladelike attachment meant for high-bandwidth transfer, and jacked into him. Starscream made a stifled noise, and then said loudly, "*Oh,*" and clutched blindly at Megatron's arms.

Ratchet's motivator had just gotten around to deciding he would yell incoherently to make a distraction for Starscream to get away, when his sluggish information systems threw in the new contradictory information that Starscream *couldn't* get away now that he'd let Megatron plug into him, which threw him back into the confused looping mode just as Megatron made a faint grunt, and Starscream started gasping, "Oh, oh, *oh,*" helplessly, over and over.

Megatron wasn't just running a standard consciousness in his processor; he had *everything* in there. If he didn't make a habit of plugging in to anyone else, that was probably a *good* thing, because it would mean pouring that titanic flow of processes straight through another cybernetic brain not built anywhere near to that capacity, pushing it to the absolute limits and probably past them. Starscream was clearly right on the line: he was panting for air so hard he was whining, and his optics were *flickering*, but he was still gripping tight, and he'd fixed his eyes on Megatron's face with a sudden devouring hunger. Megatron groaned faintly, and they brightened. "Well?" Starscream choked out in a thin reedy voice.

Megatron ground his jaw. "Damn you, Starscream, *let me in.*"

Starscream actually laughed in a wavering way and jeered faintly, "Ask nicely." Megatron growled and jerked forward slightly. Starscream let out a few small cries and shuddered violently all over, and then he gasped out again, "I said *nicely,*" in a triumphant voice.

Megatron groaned again. He was leaning forward over Starscream, his head resting against his own arm on the wall, shuddering all over with the exhaust his systems were venting. He slid his other hand around Starscream's neck, pushed his chin up hard. "I should crush your treacherous throat."

"Good luck getting deep access *then,*" Starscream taunted him. He sounded vaguely delirious.

Ratchet had stopped trying to figure out what to do, because this was *way* past his pay grade, and he was now just trying very hard to stop being conscious at all, except it was hard to do that when he'd just worked himself into a panic. He tried to persuade himself that yes, this was all within normal functioning parameters for *severely neurotraumatized mechs!* his evaluator function broke in yelling, and jolted him some more, just as Megatron gave another snarl and hissed out, "*Please,*" and Starscream gave an incoherent gasp and tipped his head back against the wall, his optics going *purple* and his mouth frozen open.

Megatron made a strangled noise. Blind pleasure surged over his face as his *own* processes expanded, probably seizing the chance to accelerate specific functions on Starscream's specialized core components, all the ones he didn't have himself. He stood rigidly still for a moment, and then went into a series of deep shuddering breaths, and then he abruptly disengaged and slid free. He turned around and sagged back against the wall with his face almost startled.

Starscream had a fairly shocked expression himself, which no wonder if he'd actually given Megatron access to his low level personality components. He stared woozily out over the room, groping a hand up his chest to help close his access panel, which wasn't shutting all the way on its own, probably because his sensors were all still stunned. He turned to stare at Megatron, who was still leaning against the wall heaving through ventilation cycles. Starscream just kept staring for another minute, and then he jerked forward and rubbed the palm of his hand over one of Megatron's access panels, the one on his left hip. It slid open instantly—Ratchet's motivator suddenly jumped yelling back to life, it was sliding open because Starscream had *reverse-injected a command code into Megatron's processes*—

Megatron's optics jolted back to furious focus as Starscream plugged right into him. "You little—" he grated out, but choked off as Starscream moaned, scrabbled at his chest blindly, and then abruptly disengaged, reeled back several steps, and fell over with a massive clang straight into a state that was less of a rest cycle than an unconscious stupor.

Megatron slammed the access panel shut with his hand, and took a furious step towards Starscream's limp body, and then looked surprised as his knees just quit out from under him and dropped him. He wavered in that kneeling position for a moment, and then he toppled over with a jolting reverberation and went out right alongside Starscream.

#

"Right, 'bee," Bumblebee mumbled to himself, just audible to Ratchet's short-range audio sensors. "New rule: never drink with Decepticons. Oh my head hurts."

"I'll put together some neural detangler," Ratchet said groggily, and then sat up painfully fast as his databanks pulled up his unwanted and extremely vivid memories of the previous night. He jerked his head around in horror—and stared. Megatron was sprawled on the floor, and Starscream had more or less cuddled up to his side, and—and they were on the other side of the room from where they'd been when they'd conked out after...what had apparently been only a *first* round.

Starscream raised his own head after a moment, bright-eyed, jumped up at once, and proceeded to make himself totally hateful to every other Decepticon by prodding them all up on their feet. He'd never even finished his first cube, so he probably didn't have so much as a twinge from a single overheated circuit. The only mech he didn't wake up was Megatron, who stirred anyway when everyone around him started moving, and sat up with a faint groan before rolling himself to his feet. He promptly parked himself in the command chair with his optics at half-mast, glaring virulently at anyone who got too close. That was absolutely no one except Starscream, who strutted over to him and made an unnecessarily loud report about the total lack of any intruders overnight, with a couple of smirking comments tossed in about how *tired* Megatron seemed, until he finally provoked Megatron into raising his head and snarling, "Starscream. *Shut. Up. Now.*"

"Oh, of *course*, fearless leader," Starscream said, and strutted right off again, obviously pleased with himself, and Megatron let his head sink back onto his fist.

"You do get that you've just created a completely *new* problem for yourself," Ratchet told Megatron in the infirmary later that day.

He'd brewed up some of Cliffjumper's Tried And True, which was basically a thinned lubricant with some trace metals sprinkled in, which you injected into your system along with a small process that coaxed your circuits into giving up the excess power they were hanging on to. Worked a treat. The Decepticons had noticed the Autobots taking the remedy, and they'd come knocking one after another, until Megatron had shown up himself.

“Also, lie down and let me take a look at those ports,” Ratchet added. “Just how often do you pull this stunt? *Any* interfacing means you’re not using those ports as intended, and getting yourself gangbanged by your entire army takes it to a new level.”

Megatron didn’t answer immediately, glugging down a quadruple-size helping of the lubricant; after he finished, he heaved himself onto the table and let himself go limp with a clank. He muttered, “When it’s called for.”

“‘Called for,’ he says,” Ratchet said, shaking his head as he poked at the access ports. It was apparently *called for* on a regular basis, judging by the wear and tear to a bunch of perfectly innocent ports that should have seen standard use maybe once in a decade, and had a highly inadequate pipeline to the self-repair systems. “Yeah, you need all of these completely rebuilt from scratch. In durasteel and titanium, if you think more orgies are going to be *called for* in future. Ouch, open that one up, how far does that crack go? Do you even *enjoy* the experience? At least half of these have got to be painful.”

“Mmrg,” Megatron said. He was drifting off into a rest state right there on the table as the process eased the energy overload out of active circuitry and back into reserves where it belonged. “I don’t mind pain. And if *you* want a turn, medic, go ahead; don’t be shy.”

Ratchet felt his emotional coprocessor spike up about ten degrees operating temperature with mortification. He *was* about four centimeters away from making active contact with the plate at the bottom of the port, but that was a carefully measured four centimeters, and he wasn’t going to slip; the embarrassment was realizing that Wheeljack wasn’t the only Autobot who’d found something about the idea *tempting*. “I don’t interface with my patients,” he said firmly, putting a lid on it. “And *you’ve* got more than enough partners. You do know that Starscream’s not going to settle for however often you hold these parties, right?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Megatron said, frowning at Ratchet. “Despite what lurid fantasies you may be coming up with, I *don’t* spend a great deal of time interfacing. Starscream will have to be patient.”

“Uh huh, that sure is a notable characteristic of his,” Ratchet said. “Megatron, you gave him a way to actually *win* against you, and it’s something he can do *over and over*. All the time he used to spend figuring out ways to overthrow you, he’s now going to spend on figuring out ways to get your ports open. He’s going to be on you every minute of the day.”

Megatron turned his head back to frowning deeply at the ceiling, but he didn’t dispute the assessment. He even sighed after a moment. “Is this going to solve the problem at least?” he demanded.

“The problem of Starscream being depressed? Sure,” Ratchet said. “I’m not sure how it works out for his long-term health if he pisses you off badly enough for you to slag him, though.”

“I can handle Starscream,” Megatron said, which Ratchet thought was optimistic.

“If you say so,” Ratchet said. “Okay, hold still a moment, I’m going to get this bonded.” He’d finished getting the debris out of the jagged crack going down the length of the port; he tapped in a bit of liquisteel and carefully maneuvered the microbonder to start sealing it.

“I do say so,” Megatron said. “Speaking of *handling* my soldiers, this charming plan of yours for Thundercracker is off the table. If you want to repair him, you can do it in Darkmount.”

Ratchet winced as he finished and withdrew the bonder. Right. Thundercracker had interfaced with

Megatron last night, and he'd probably been worrying about the idea in his main processing, and Megatron had caught some of it. Good thing Wheeljack hadn't yielded to temptation, for that matter. "Funny enough, I'd rather rely on Optimus letting Thundercracker go than on you letting *me* go. Do you even *have* an infirmary in Darkmount, as opposed to torture facilities?"

"We'll repurpose equipment as necessary," Megatron said dryly. "Don't fret, medic. I'm planning to trade you back to Prime anyway, I'll just keep you until it's done." And then he rolled up on one elbow and fixed his red gaze on Ratchet's face. "On the other hand, I understand you've been re-evaluating your politics. Perhaps you'd like to stay, instead. You've some distance to go to reach neutrality, after eight million years patching Autobots."

Ratchet stared at him and realized belatedly that Megatron hadn't just been mocking him right then, with the interfacing offer; he was deliberately *making a play*. It was a smart play, too; how the hell had he just *guessed* that Ratchet had been thinking about evening things up?

Hard on the heels of that realization came the more disturbing one that his own motivator was actually *considering* it, and not just for any half-baked idea of balancing things out. The universe didn't really work that way. But...he'd so far treated four Decepticons out of twelve, and they'd all had neurotrauma ranging from severe to near-fatal. They also had an incredible capacity for emotional suppression, which was why they hadn't all just gone catatonic, but there were limits, and eight million years of war without a decent medic...

He'd taken too long to say *no way*, and Megatron's eyes gleamed. "Or if you prefer," he said, low and persuasive, "we'll dig out Mercy of Polyhex for you. The upper levels of the facility were destroyed in our initial campaign to take the city from the Autobot overseers, but the lower levels are intact. It's far enough from Darkmount and the munitions factories to make it an unenticing military target, but close enough to keep it under full Decepticon security. We'll keep the facility subterranean so no one will be inclined to imagine it's a front for a military operation beneath—and I'm prepared to grant safe passage to all neutrals and Autobots."

Ratchet jerked his head away, running a hand down his face. "Damn, you're good," he managed. His future-projection systems had literally built him a quick sensory vision of the place as Megatron had talked through it, and his whole emotional center yearned for the shining symbolism of it: a *hospital* open on Cybertron again, and *that* hospital. A place of horrors, where Decepticons had been sent to suffer and die and be torn apart, transformed into a place of *real* mercy. A chance to cleanse one of the original sins of the war.

"I try," Megatron said. He swung his legs over and stood up. "Think it over, Ratchet."

Ratchet sat down on his own table after Megatron had walked out, and put his head in his hands. He flinched up when a knock came on the door; a moment later, Bumblebee poked his head in. "Hey, doc," he said. "Just thought I'd see if you're okay."

Ratchet just stared at him. He couldn't come up with an answer. Bumblebee's face fell a little, and then he came in and let the door shut and hopped up onto the table to sit next to him. "You want to talk about it?" he asked.

Ratchet looked down at his hands. Healer's hands, not soldier's hands; all these years, he'd resolutely kept replacing them with woven permium instead of military-grade materials, even though they wore out faster working on armor and weapons. "Megatron offered to let me reopen Mercy of Polyhex as a neutral facility. Decepticon security, safe passage for all."

Bumblebee whistled out some exhaust. "You buy he means it?"

“Yeah,” Ratchet said. “It’s a smart move for him. The Decepticons...they’re in bad shape, ’bee. They’re carrying neurotrauma loads like you wouldn’t believe, and if any of them would ever let Hook or Soundwave past so much as their top-level processing zone, I’d eat my bonder. Letting me treat neutral and Autobot patients who make the trek out to Polyhex, in exchange for his people getting treatment too? Sure, why not.”

“You...but you’re not...are you...gonna do it?” Bumblebee said, in a small voice.

“No,” Ratchet said. He couldn’t. He wanted to treat those Decepticons, wanted to help them. If any of them came to his hands, he would. But he couldn’t build a practice whose main purpose would be to send them out again to kill Autobots, to kill humans. “No,” he repeated, his vocal unit distorting a little. “I can’t. But...I wish I could.”

#

Cliffjumper’s best or not, they all still mostly spent the rest of the morning feeling vaguely sorry for themselves and at best pretending to do any work, at least until Loadedge came back: he had a new target to sell them. “This is Sideline,” he said, introducing a grey-armored mech with no neck, long unbalanced skinny arms and stumpy legs, a body clearly designed for the convenience of others, to carry out some specific set of probably drone-repetitive tasks. They’d even taken his vocal unit out; he was only able to communicate with visual projections, but he got Megatron’s attention with those pretty quick.

“He’s one of the oldest mechs in the resistance,” Loadedge said. “He can’t really fight, so he’s stayed underground, to help us try to maintain some continuity and keep records. But before he turned intractable, he was one of the workers on the pipeline beneath the Galtia Sea, before it was filled—the Makers built it only recently.”

“Wait,” Scrapper interjected. “They *built* a sea? Why?”

“Oh...” Loadedge said. “I don’t know. They like the way it looks, I guess. They built these mountains, too,” he added. “But these are pretty old. They were finished more than half a million years ago. The Galtia Sea was only filled four thousand years ago. The Makers were really proud of it.”

Scrapper was scrunched up in total bafflement, staring around at the mountains, obviously on the verge of asking dangerous questions, like *why did they have to build mountains*. Fortunately, Megatron said, “I’m not interested in the bizarre preoccupations of the local organics.” Loadedge and Sideline both flinched and darted looks around, like they instinctively expected someone to jump out of somewhere and drag everyone off for recycling, just for disrespect. “What *is* interesting about this pipeline?”

“It provides all the fuel for High Galtia,” Loadedge said. “That’s the Makers’ capital: they moved it to an island in the center of the sea, when it was finished. And when they built the island, they made sure they’d have enough power for any future use, even if there were ever any leaks that required the pipeline to be temporarily shut down for repairs.”

Sideline projected an image of a large dark chamber with a shaft rising upwards, presumably into the city’s guts. He put a few terse captions along the bottom: *completed fuel reservoir, pre-filling*. “Mm,” Megatron said, frowning. “And now it’s been filled, I presume? What’s the capacity? I can’t determine the scale.”

“Oh,” Hook said. “*Oh*. I can. Megatron, that’s a ladder with a *mech* on it. The same model as him.” He pointed to a thin black line going up the wall, and as soon as Ratchet looked at it with

magnification, he saw Hook was right: it was another mech configured just like Sideline. The place was...monstrous. The shaft was as big around as the Equatorial Passage, practically. The reservoir chamber below—it was six times as vast.

“And it’s *full* of energon?” Starscream’s voice rose almost disbelievingly.

Sideline nodded. Megatron was studying it with undisguised greed. “Does he know a way to access that reservoir?” he demanded.

“Yes,” Loadedge said. “He helped construct the pipeline and the reservoir. When he turned intractable and left, he came out through an access tunnel that gave into the scaffolding of the city.” Sideline was projecting images as Loadedge talked, a first-person view of moving down a small dark tunnel, close enough to be a tight fit, and then a lid opening to let in a blinding light as he came out into a half-finished street, concrete and brick being laid down on top of beams. “That’s a street in the south quadrant of the city. By now, the access panel will be sealed with an encrypted lock, of course —”

“Obstacle irrelevant,” Soundwave put in.

“We’ll hit it under cover of dark,” Megatron said. “And we’re *all* going, this time. I want every one of you to cram your subspace compartments to capacity—and yes, that *does* include you all,” he added pointedly to Ironhide. “And you as well, medic. Take your next shift now, and get ready to go.”

“I’m just as glad we’re going,” Wheeljack said to Ratchet under his breath. “We’ve got to keep Loadedge and Sideline talking about anything else, anything safe.”

“Do you think *they* know?” Ratchet said slowly.

Wheeljack shook his head. “They woulda told Megatron in five seconds, right? No reason why they would know, if their *old* guy is someone the Makers built for a project that finished up four thousand years ago. This thing has been chugging away for millions of years—since well before Straxus crashlanded here. And all that time, the Makers have been building up layers and layers, little by little—probably trying to make it resemble their planet of origin. Can you imagine the kind of work that went in to putting up *mountains*? They have power to burn, but they’ve got to bring in all their materials from the moons or the rings. There’s literally nothing between us and the surface of a star that they haven’t shipped in.”

#

Higher Galtria was another dazzling confection of a city, full of monumental spires almost as tall as Cybertron’s starscrapers and awash in light. Clinging on to Scrapper’s back as they flew silently in between the gleaming buildings and elevated highways, Ratchet caught glimpses of a few Makers moving inside: tall and spiky-looking creatures with four jointed legs around a vaguely humanoid torso and arms with extremely long and thin fingers. They looked as fragile as crystal; you could see why they would want robots to do their heavy lifting. Once he saw a screen on a wall projecting images in an odd repetitive pattern, pictures of the smoking ruin of Priatol City. Several of the Makers were gathered in front of it obviously intent, and a scrolling caption in their language was saying *Quantum Black Hole Disaster*. So it hadn’t even occurred to them yet that it had been an attack—an attack by mechs.

The lights faded away one after another as they descended. The high elevated roads were full of organic-scale vehicles, but the lower streets were full of silent mechs with tiny flecks of running lights, no more, rolling in an unending flow even while above the Makers were going to their rest.

Below even that, on the ground, there was almost no one at all; in fact, it looked like new work was being done overhead to enclose the ground level entirely. The Constructicons had to cut away some beams before Sideline could lead them to the access port he'd used. Soundwave knelt down beside it to work while the rest of them stood waiting. "And they just built that whole ocean we flew over, and this island too, huh?" Skywarp was saying, staring around up at the city. "And now they're just shutting up these levels down here? What for? They look okay to me. I don't get organics."

"They all want to live at the top, we think," Loadedge said. "We don't really know. I don't know anyone who's ever *talked* to one of them. Only small tractables are used for personal service."

Scrapper shook his head professionally. "Well, if they're planning to build anything taller, they're going about it a very peculiar way. They can't simply slap a cover over a vacant space like this and set a new tower atop it. How far down is it to bedrock?"

"I—I don't know," Loadedge said dubiously.

"Well, how did they make the island strong enough to take the weight of the city?" Scrapper said.

Just in the nick of time, "Access achieved," Soundwave said, and the door of the port clicked and rotated slightly open.

"Chatter later," Megatron said. "We've got more important things to do."

They let themselves down into the tunnel, which wasn't actually a tunnel but a claustrophobic crawl space, its borders defined by pipes and bundles of wires snaking around and alongside each other, sprouting off branches that presumably went aloft to the shining buildings. A thin gangplank had been laid down just for convenience. It creaked and rattled under their feet ominously. Ratchet couldn't see into the depths very far, but they seemed full of strange shadows, and faint flickers of light here and there. Creepy as hell, even to a mech who was used to crawling through Cybertron's innards.

Finally a faint violet-pink glow started to appear up ahead, painting the walls of the passageway, and in a few more minutes they were standing on a thin rim of a landing, with a ladder descending towards a monumental lake of seething energon below. "Wow," Thundercracker muttered, sounding overwhelmed. Ratchet couldn't blame him. He'd never even heard of that much energon in one place before, certainly not just as a lake of open energon. There hadn't been reservoirs like this on Cybertron since—well, since the half-legendary Age of the Ancients, if those old stories were even real; tens of millions of years before Ratchet had rolled off the construction line.

The Constructicons quickly stretched the catwalk into a larger walkway with a platform and a pulley system and started hauling up energon by the bucketful. Ironhide was scowling unhappily, but Ratchet got in line for his load early so he could go talk to Loadedge and Sideline, and hopefully keep any of the Decepticons from doing as much. "How long were you working down here?" he asked Sideline, once he'd loaded up and moved out of the way: the two of them didn't have transform modes, and no subspace controllers, so they were just hanging back sitting on the catwalk. "It must've taken hundreds of thousands of years to build it."

Sideline shrugged a bit. He looked at Loadedge, who said, "It took—forty-seven thousand, I think. That's when they announced it, anyway."

"That fast, huh?" Ratchet said grimly. This wasn't a forty-seven thousand year project. It was a two hundred thousand year project working at breakneck speed the whole time. "How many hours a day did they have them down here?"



Loadedge and Sideline both just looked at him with a little confusion, like they didn't understand the question. "They didn't leave," Loadedge said. "I mean, except for Sideline and the two others who went intractable."

"They—" Ratchet stuck in the horror of it. He stared at Sideline. "They never let you *leave*? They had all of you working down here without a look at the surface for all forty-seven thousand years? And only three of you ever quit and left, that whole time?"

Sideline stared back with another terrible, confused look, and looked at Loadedge, who said, "No, that's not—I mean, yes, they were down here the whole time, but Sideline, the others, they didn't quit during the construction. They left after."

"I—I don't understand," Ratchet said. "If they left and the others—" He stopped and swallowed. He didn't really want to know the answer. "Are the others—still down here working?" he forced himself to ask. "They've *never* been allowed up?"

It was as horrible as he could imagine, and apparently, he was still falling short, because they were both still just looking blank. "They were built for this project," Loadedge said. "There wasn't anything else for them to work on."

"They recycled—*all* of them?" Ratchet managed.

"No," Loadedge said. "They do that sometimes, but they needed them here afterwards. That's why they're built like that," and Loadedge waved a hand up and down Sideline's strange, squat, squared-off body, with its narrow arms—

Ratchet jerked to his feet almost involuntarily; his head was pounding. "Where are they?" he said flatly.

Loadedge stared up at him, startled. "What?"

"*Where are they?*" Ratchet said. "Take me to them. You said this project was only completed four thousand years ago. There's still time. Take me to them. Now."

"But..." Loadedge said, looking helplessly over at the others.

Megatron was standing at the end of the walkway supervising the loading, his arms folded over his chest; he glanced back and frowned. "What is it?"

"They've got more mechs down here," Ratchet said to him. "Like Straxus." Megatron's eyes narrowed. "I'm going. If Loadedge won't take me, I'll just start looking for them myself. Shoot me if you want to. I'm going."

"Stop being melodramatic," Megatron said impatiently, and looked around. "Soundwave, have there been any reports of our intrusion?"

"Negative," Soundwave said. "Local network activity at baseline levels. Authorities are responding to a false report of fire generated on the other side of the city. We remain undetected."

"Fine," Megatron said. "Scraper, keep those cubes coming. Starscream, stay here and cover them. Those of you who've already loaded up, come with me."

Starscream's head swung round. "Surely it would be more prudent for Soundwave to remain instead. He can send Laserbeak to bring us back even if communications are disrupted, and Ravage can keep watch in the access tunnel. I'll get my load and come with you."

Megatron did a small double-take frown after Starscream, who was already darting out onto the platform snapping at the Constructicons to hand over a full load of cubes; he transformed around them so fast he nearly knocked Bonecrusher off the platform. “Hey!” Bonecrusher yelled, and swung a fist down at Starscream’s back fins, but Starscream had already transformed back and evaded him with slightly contemptuous ease.

“Don’t blame *me* for your own clumsiness,” he sneered over his shoulder from halfway down the walkway. Bonecrusher scowled after him and smacked a meaty fist into his other palm, muttering, but Scrapper gave him a shove to set him back to hauling up the next massive cauldron full of energon.

“Hang on, doc, I’m gettin’ my load too,” Ironhide growled; he’d been hanging back, but he stomped up after Starscream cleared the platform and transformed and let the Constructicons pack his vehicle mode compartment with cubes, although he made a sour face walking off afterwards.

Ratchet made himself wait through all the fuss mostly by telling himself in no uncertain terms that after four thousand years, five minutes wouldn’t make a difference, and having help might make it easier. Loadedge and Sideline both still looked sort of bewildered, like they couldn’t imagine anyone trying to help. They probably couldn’t. Why would the Makers create medics? Surely it was cheaper and easier just to recycle their mechs, or *repurpose* them— Ratchet shuddered all over.

“Lord Megatron,” Loadedge was even saying uncertainly, “I’m not sure—I don’t think you understand—”

Megatron waved a hand to cut him off. “Humor the medic,” he said. Right, because Megatron was still *courting* him. Well, Ratchet was more than happy to put that to use right now. He fell in right behind Loadedge and Sideline, already mentally calculating how far the intrusion into the mechs’ systems could have gotten, how bad it might be. It would depend on how much they’d resisted. Straxus had held out for millions of years—but he’d been a Decepticon, and a free Cybertronian; he hadn’t spent a lifetime in slavery, toiling in the dark. He’d had the memory of something better to keep fighting for. “Sideline, do you mind if I scan your system?” he asked quietly. Sideline glanced back and shrugged his boxy shoulders, giving permission; his armor was easily permeable to a variety of scanning techniques, and Ratchet started running a full evaluation as they walked.

It wasn’t a long time. Sideline took a turn onto another rough walkway that branched from the previous access tunnel, and after that it was maybe only a hundred meters when he came up to a railing overlooking a dark space: the walkway turned to go in either direction, and narrow catwalks ran from it over the space like a latticework. Sideline gestured over the rail.

“They’re here?” Ratchet said.

“Some of them are,” Loadedge said.

Ratchet stared at him, then stepped forward and turned on his search beams to sweep the darkness, and then he locked up.

“I don’t get it,” Ironhide said. “There’s some mechs here? Where?”

“Yeah, I don’t see anybody,” Thundercracker said. “Are they down at the bottom?” He peered over the railing. “There’s just those—columns—” His voice died suddenly. Ratchet was still frozen.

“Sweet Cybertron,” Ironhide said, his voice barely audible.

“How was this done to them?” Megatron said through his teeth. He was staring out into the space,

the huge vaulted foundation of what had to be one of those starscrapers above, its weight supported—on the backs of mechs, of *thousands* of mechs, their squat bodies disappearing out of Ratchet's lamplight down into the dark, stacked one on top of another—neatly, *neatly*; the arms had sunk into their bodies to leave sockets at the four corners of the shoulders, the legs had folded in below with the square knee caps as protrusions, so the mech above fit snugly into the one beneath. Their heads had folded inward. They'd—*transformed*. A limited, grotesque approximation of transformation, designed by someone who'd wanted to save materials and time; once your specialized army of robots weren't needed anymore, why bother melting them down and pouring foundations? Why not just—turn them *into* the foundations.

"They don't even show signs of damage," Starscream said, in a stifled voice. "There are so many of them, how could they be forced into this?"

"But they weren't intractable," Loadedge said, almost desperately, like he was trying to make them understand something obvious. "None of them were intractable."

Megatron transferred his stare down at him. "Are you saying they were *told* to submit to this—and they *obeyed*?"

"Y-yes?" Loadedge said, almost cringing back. "If they didn't, then—then they would be intractable. That's—that's what it means. That you don't obey."

"Are they—they're all dead. Are they all dead?" Ironhide blurted suddenly. "Doc, are they—"

"No," Ratchet said, or tried to. It wouldn't come out of his vocal unit. He had to consciously jolt it active, and his voice came out a harsh croak. "No. They're just—not alive either."

"There was no use for them anymore," Loadedge said. "So they were told where to report—and then—they were allowed to stop. Instead of being recycled."

"Stop?" Thundercracker said. "What, like a—a *rest* cycle? Are you saying their cores are still *active*?"

Ratchet couldn't drag his eyes away from the horror of it. He knew without wanting to how it had worked. Cybernetic brains couldn't go for more than four days active without a rest cycle before breaking down, but if you didn't mind risking damage to memory banks or personality core, you *could* keep them going for about a hundred thousand years at a steady pace of three days active with a half-length rest cycle, building up a massive defrag debt along the way. That's what they'd done with these mechs. They'd kept them under-rested, no defragging allowed at all, working without a pause in the dark, and at the end of it—he imagined it vividly, being told you *could* rest. You could rest as long as you wanted to. You could defrag. You didn't have to work anymore. You could—stop. And all you had to do was step over here, right on top of this other mech, see, he's already done it, and transform—

Megatron's hand fell on his shoulder like a weight and pulled him away from it, turning him around. "Can you get them out?" he demanded.

Ratchet stared up at him. "No," he said, choked. "They..." He waved a hand behind him, helpless and sick with it. "Sideline's armor is composed of a chrominoid alloy. It flows under extreme pressure. The weight of the city above—the armor between the mechs will have separated. And then their self-repair systems will have...they've been..."

"Woven together," Megatron said, savagely.

“I think I’m gonna *purge*,” Ironhide said, an arm over his mouth.

“Me too,” Thundercracker choked out.

“Then go do it somewhere else!” Starscream said with an edge. “If I hear you, *I’m* going—”

“*Silence!*” Megatron roared, his voice echoing through that hideous cathedral space like thunder. He turned to Ratchet. “They can’t be cut apart? Could you extract their cores—”

“There’s no *them* anymore,” Ratchet said, his voice crackling into static. “They—they were *designed* for this. Once the armor separated, the self-repair systems...they would have started detecting the presence of duplicate personality components. So they—their *own systems* would have attacked enough of each component to—oh *Primus*, please don’t make me talk about it anymore,” he gasped out, bending over double.

“Come,” he heard Megatron telling the others as he turned away. Ironhide was already there, getting Ratchet’s arm over his broad solid back, catching him before he slid. “I gotcha, Doc,” he muttered, and Ratchet blindly leaned against him.

He stumbled along, back to the glowing reservoir of energon, shining up like a grotesque mockery: enough energon to keep every one of those mechs functioning for ten million years with plenty to spare, but the *Makers* hadn’t cared. They’d spent the lives and sentience of those mechs for *nothing*. Or—no. Not for nothing. For *time*. Time, the most precious thing organic beings could get. They had bought themselves an ocean and an island and a towering city in less than fifty thousand years. By designing an army of mechs to labor in the dark for them, from the first day to the last, and then to be turned into a half-living foundation for their monstrous towers, to save the time of shipping in more raw material.

And there would be more. Ratchet laughed suddenly, a jangling sound that made Ironhide look at him worried; Bumblebee crouched next to him and put a hand on his arm. “They like to live at the top,” Ratchet said helplessly. “They’re enclosing new levels. They’re going to—to build *more*—”

“No, they’re not,” Megatron said. “Scrapper, is everyone loaded up?”

“Yes, Megatron,” Scrapper said, stepping forward. “We kept filling the cubes while you were gone, and we’ve parked the equipment. We can make an entire second run tomorrow in half the time—”

“Blow it up instead,” Megatron said.

“What?” Scrapper said, a little blankly.

“You heard me,” Megatron said. “Build me a bomb, and *blow this city up*.”

Scrapper gaped at him. “But,” he stammered. “But—Megatron, there’s a *quintillion* astroliters of energon down there!”

“Then that should make your job easier,” Megatron said. “*Get to work*.”

Scrapper tottered around almost dazed to the other staring Constructicons and said faintly, “Mixmaster, we’ll need more durasteel and vantic wire. Hook, prepare an—an energon-detonation device.”

“Are you insane? I’m not doing that *down here!*” Hook said. “Someone else with a disintegration wish can—getting started! Getting started!” he squeaked, backing away as Megatron wheeled on him with a blazing snarl.

The Constructicons started working, darting startled, alarmed glances over their shoulders at Megatron. He stalked out to the edge of the platform and stood there staring down into the shining pit of energon. His eyes were glowing furiously. All the Decepticons had drawn into small clusters, murmuring to each other, watching him.

And then Soundwave walked out after him and stopped, just a step back. “Megatron,” he said, “Explosion will trigger elevated surveillance of surrounding region immediately. Visibility while traveling over open water: high. We will be detected before reaching the mainland.”

“Then we’ll leave it running on a timer!” Megatron said.

Soundwave paused for a long moment and then said quietly, “The enemy has not yet identified us as a significant military threat. We are currently classified by planetary intelligence systems as alien intractables dangerous on a local level. Their primary hypothesis for Priatol City: natural disaster. A second citywide event will alter their analysis. Planetary-scale response likely. Subsequent escape from system: difficult to accomplish. Current strategic and tactical position of our force: highly precarious. Course of action: unwise.”

The Decepticons all stopped what they were doing, looking over at Megatron anxiously. His fists were clenched, but his optics dimmed; the rage being quenched out of him like hot metal slid carefully into a cooling bath. After a moment he said, “Can we trigger a detonation device planted here remotely? From orbit?” and all the Decepticons relaxed minutely, like a meteor storm had gone by without any critical hits.

Soundwave was silent while he ran through calculations. “Attempt possible. Outcome uncertain. Signal disruption likely. Proximity required to ensure success: ground level of city.”

“I—I’ll do it,” Loadedge said, in a shaking voice. They all turned to look at him. He stepped forward out onto the platform and came to stare up at Megatron with his dull grey optics. “Leave it with me, and I’ll detonate it,” he said in a gasp. “After you’ve left the planet. Please, Lord Megatron.”

Soundwave said softly, “Operation not recommended. Resources currently devoted to suppression of intractable resistance: minimal. Strategic value of capital city as military target: nil. Enemy reaction: disproportionate. Supervision and monitoring of all mechs will be increased. Surveillance will be added. Existing resistance cells will be crushed.”

Loadedge was silent, and then he said, “They’d crush us any time we really hurt them. So it might as well be now. We all know it’s just a matter of time.”

“Build it for him,” Megatron said, low, after a moment. He waved a hand in a sharp jerk of dismissal and turned his back. Soundwave inclined his head and turned away; he and the Constructicons quickly finished rigging up the device. Loadedge walked back off the platform and sat down to watch them do it with a hungry, savagely eager look.

Ratchet just sat hunched against the wall with his arms gripping his legs and his forehead pressed against his knee joints. He didn’t say anything. He couldn’t. Blowing up the city would set those mechs free, the ones buried alive. Ratchet couldn’t say that wasn’t worth doing, even at the cost of another life. He’d have given his own to do it. But it wouldn’t change the world. The mechs who were going to be turned into the next foundations would die in fire, instead. And when the rubble was cleared, the Makers would rebuild their island in the sea on the back of another million mechs, and raise themselves new shining towers to live in.

Back at the ship, the Decepticons unloaded the energon cubes quietly, efficiently. The small dent from the drinking party vanished away beneath the stacks. Megatron had gone to sit in the command chair, staring out at the viewscreen. Nobody talked. Ironhide didn't even grumble about being used as a Decepticon energy transport. Loadedge and Sideline had gone back to the resistance cell, to talk to the others. They didn't seem to think anyone was going to have any problems with Loadedge's plan. Even though it probably meant all of them dying sooner rather than later.

Scrapper had brought back the detonator. It wasn't a big device. It was sitting on the command console, not far from where Megatron was sitting, but he never looked at it. Ratchet made himself *stop* looking at it and turned back to the drive circuitry. Hook was already working on it again; he'd gone to it straight after the unloading had finished, and Ratchet followed him in. His emotional processes hadn't dropped out again, though he wasn't sure why, so it was a relief to throw all his power to his frontal circuitry and fill his entire processor with nothing but the interwoven intricacies of warp navigation mathematics.

They got to the end of their shift. When Ratchet straightened, Hook did too, but he was frowning down at the drive. He said abruptly, "One more shift of nine hours would do it. If we take a fifteen minute rest cycle and then refuel to capacity, we could get away with one frontal circuitry flash-reset."

Ratchet paused a moment. Flashing your circuitry required being at full power—rare enough to begin with—and on top of that it was addictive and done too often caused memory failures, so he had a bog-standard answer for that idea whenever a patient trotted out the idea. He didn't pull it out now. "Yeah," he said flatly. "Let's do it."

The flash-reset left him with an unpleasant scoured-clean sensation in his frontal circuitry, but he could dive back into the work without a break. He thought of nothing but lines of incron transistors and quantum wiring until suddenly he was coming back to the beginning, closing the drive loop. Hook placed one final transistor, he etched one final flow, and they were done. It was done.

"Prepare for departure," was all Megatron said when they told him. But all the Decepticons sprang into action like they'd been unchained. Scrapper kicked everyone out of the ship while he did a final check of the systems with Wheeljack. Ratchet sat down with Ironhide and the other Autobots crammed a little tightly between the hull and the cavern wall. Bumblebee leaned into his side comfortingly. "Never figured I'd be glad to go anywhere with a buncha Decepticons," Brawn muttered. "But I am now."

"You said it," Ironhide said.

Scrapper and Wheeljack came out again after half an hour. "All pre-flight checks are complete," Scrapper said. "We're ready to go, Megatron."

"An' about time," Ironhide growled, standing up. "Let's get off this rotten smelting-pit of a planet. I'd rather get dropped into the prison pits under Darkmount than stay in this place."

"Well, *that's* good," Scavenger said, and sniggered.

Thundercracker shoved him. "Quit bein' a jerk," he said shortly. "The Autobot's right. Let's get out of here."

Ratchet stared up at the *Excelsior*. He'd gone aboard as an Autobot volunteer: Optimus had asked for a skeleton crew, just the bare minimum of mechs to keep the thing in the air as a big juicy target to draw Megatron's fire. He'd figured...there wasn't going to be any real fighting aboard; if the Decepticons did hit them, the lack of one gun wasn't going to make a difference. And he'd be there

to patch up the Autobots that got hurt when the ship got taken.

When he went aboard this time, he had no idea what he'd be doing it as. *Some experiences have a disproportionate effect on our personalities*, he'd told Megatron. It was true. Too much had come in, too much he couldn't reconcile with the rest of his self and personality, and yeah, something had to give. Ratchet knew he couldn't step into the inviting picture Megatron had painted for him. He just didn't know what he *could* do.

For now, all he could do was get on board. He stood up. Wheeljack was at the base of the loading ramp with his hands clamped on each other behind his back to keep from vibrating with relief.

"No," Megatron said.

Ratchet paused at the base of the ramp and turned, along with everyone else. Megatron was standing at the cavern mouth, his back to the ship. Loadedge had stepped up to his side, hand held out for the detonator Megatron was holding.

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Ironhide growled, full of suspicion. "This the time when you pull a double-cross and try to leave us behind—"

"No," Megatron said flatly. "You may do as you wish. But *I* am not going."

They were all gawking at him when he turned around. His face was set and cold and hard, and he didn't look at all as if he was joking. Ratchet traded a horrified look with Wheeljack, seeing the same thought there in his face: *he's figured out about the stellar jacket—*

"But—" Starscream took a step forward. He jerked his head around to look at Ironhide, and back. "Megatron, you must see—their entire mission, it was a *decoy*. Optimus Prime used them as a diversion. He's probably—" Starscream made a sudden churning gesture with his hand, and blurted, "—he's probably launched a foothold assault on Iacon City! There are enough Autobot sympathizers there to make a buffer. He'll be entrenched within the week if he isn't already!"

Ironhide and Brawn had flinched so hard at Starscream's too-sharp guess that if Megatron had spotted it, he could've upgraded it from a probability to a certainty. But he said, "Yes. You're undoubtedly correct. But it doesn't matter."

"It—" Starscream just gaped at him. "It doesn't—*matter—*"

Ratchet swallowed hard. He was waiting for Megatron to tell Starscream that an Autobot outpost on Iacon was insignificant, to tell the Decepticons they were standing on a power source big enough to end the war, big enough to let him unleash the Decepticon war machine across the galaxy, an unstoppable terror. He'd seen that enormous reservoir, he had to have been thinking about where the power came from.

"I conquered Cybertron once to free us from the Autobot yoke," Megatron said. "I'll do it all over again from the beginning if I have to. But I am not leaving this monstrosity of a planet behind me."

The words hung up in Ratchet's audio processing for a few confirmation cycles before his system finally let them in. Megatron held up the detonator in his hand and crushed it, letting the pieces fall away. "One city is meaningless," he said flatly. "I will level them *all*." He swept one arm like a scythe across the curving horizon. "I will not leave this world until every last one of the recycling pits has been choked with ash, until every tractable mech has learned to raise their hands against their Makers, and I have reduced to rubble and ruin every last one of the cities they have built out of the corpses of our dead."

All the Decepticons were frozen, staring at him. Megatron looked around at them, and the rage in his eyes softened by a degree. “I command none of you to stay,” he said, almost gently. “*You* are not tractable, nor would I desire you to be. Many of you might say this is not our battle, and you would be correct. But... it is my war. And I mean to win it everywhere, not only on Cybertron.”

Nobody moved or said anything. Moving seemed impossible. The whole world had taken on a weird unreal cast suddenly; Ratchet dimly identified the symptoms of an information-processing anomaly, something coming in so unexpected it was making his system run a full-scope diagnostics routine to make sure his sensory processing units were working correctly. The Decepticons seemed just as bewildered.

And then Starscream took a sudden jerky step forward. He looked almost as stunned as he had that night with Megatron, as if his whole universe was reconfiguring all over again. Megatron looked at him, and Starscream swallowed visibly, the ailerons on his wings shifting up and down in a flutter. He said, “We’ll need a broader perimeter of aerial control. I’ll go out on a reconnaissance sweep pattern.”

Megatron put his hand on Starscream's shoulder and gripped hard, his eyes gleaming. After a moment, Skywarp nudged a gaping Thundercracker, and they stepped forward. “We’ll—we’ll go with you, Screamer,” Thundercracker said. Megatron let go, and Starscream jerked his head to the others, went straight to the mouth of the cavern and led them out into the air. They didn’t even glance back.

Soundwave said to Megatron, “Increased control over planetary communications network feasible with launch of five microsatellites. Recommended priority: acquiring materials. Laserbeak and Buzzsaw will identify likely targets.” Megatron nodded, and Soundwave touched his shoulder, sending the two birds launching.

Scrapper said, “We’ll start work on a satellite launcher for you, Soundwave,” glancing around at the other Constructicons; they were all staring, but after a moment they all nodded slowly.

“Hey, we could expand the base further, too,” Scavenger put in suddenly. “I’ve been checking out the surroundings—scanning for metals, that kinda—anyway, there’s another big cavern below, under the level of the ground, surrounded by solid rock. No way for an outside assault to come at it. We could tunnel down there—use this just as a launch pad—I mean, if you all thought that was a good idea, maybe it isn’t, but I thought—”

“Shut up and come on already,” Long Haul said. He and Bonecrusher grabbed him and dragged him off to the back of the cave.

All the Decepticons were stepping away from the ship. Abandoning it, like a shed skin, grown too tight. The Autobots were all still gathered around the foot of the ramp; Brawn and Ironhide out in front with their mouths open and their guns hanging limp from their hands: like they’d been primed for a fight, for that double-cross Ironhide had mentioned, and they had no idea what to even do with themselves now.

Ratchet still couldn’t speak, couldn’t move. Bumblebee had a supportive hand on his back, but his whole core was jangling with the tail ends of dying processes, killed off in a shocking swath as his primary motivation function disengaged, letting a new one that had been slowly iterating to maturity in his subconscious rise into its place. It was still spawning new processes for motor control and language output.

But after a moment, they’d finished taking hold, and Ratchet took a first step forward, a little bit jerky, Bumblebee’s hand sliding off. “Doc?” Bumblebee said, in a small uncertain voice, but Ratchet



couldn't turn around. He took a second step and a third, and Megatron looked down at him.

Ratchet said, "I'll need an isolated chamber on that lower level for an infirmary. With neutrino shielding, as soon as we can manage it."

Megatron nodded and called, "Scrapper." The Constructicon leader turned. "Arrange for Ratchet to get what he requires."

Ratchet took a deep breath and turned around. The other Autobots were all staring at him appalled. Ratchet swallowed and stepped forward, reaching out to them; it hurt to see their confusion. "I'm sorry," he said softly.

"Doc," Ironhide said, helplessly, "Doc, you're not—you can't mean it. You aren't really gonna *stay* here with a bunch of Decepticons? Stay with *Megatron*?"

Ratchet suddenly knew consciously what he hadn't finished processing before; something he'd begun to grasp. "Ironhide," he said slowly, "Megatron is everything we know he is. But..." Ratchet made a small gesture out at the cave mouth, the world outside. "He'll look at the world around him and decide it's got to change. No matter what it costs."

The others were all silent. Then Bumblebee burst out, "But we're not going either, are we?" They all jerked around and stared at him. "*We're* the good guys! Are we really going to take the ship full of energon and *fly away* while the *Decepticons* stay behind to save the mechs on this planet? We—we can't. We can't!"

Ironhide gaped at him. He traded an appalled look with Brawn, and they turned to stare almost stricken over at Megatron: he and Soundwave were talking intently to Loadedge, having him tell them everything he knew about the planet's defenses and the loose resistance network, how many mechs there were, their capabilities. Soundwave had projected a map of the planet's surface, and Loadedge was almost frenziedly pointing out military outposts, resistance cells, words spilling over each other as he tried to tell them five high-priority things at once even while running a data dump at the same time. Megatron's eyes were glowing as his processor started churning away on the strategic options.

"Hey," Wheeljack said, his voice wobbly, "hey, I was just thinking...you remember the boosters we made for the Dinobots, to help them tamp down their aggression? Well...the mechs here, they need kinda the opposite. These Makers probably build them as depressed as they can. A small external unit to boost the imagination center and motivator function, something that wouldn't even require surgery—it could be attached right at the base of the skullcase. Heck, you could build it with clamping-grade magnets and just—*drop* it on a whole army of them." He swallowed and said in almost a gasp, "W-we—we could build it in a week, Doc."

"You're *joining the Decepticons*," Brawn said flatly. "Just to make sure you're clear on this. You're *joining the Decepticons*."

"Nah, it's worse than that, buddy," Bumblebee said, putting his hand around Brawn's shoulder. Brawn looked down at him. "*We're* joining the Decepticons."

Brawn leaned back from him with an expression of absolute revulsion, and then it wavered and gave way all at once. He looked at Ironhide with a last sort of desperate hope. Ironhide just groaned and gripped his head with his hands. "How'm I ever supposed to look Optimus in the face ever again?" he demanded.

"Well," Ratchet managed, his vocal control almost overwhelmed by the wave of love his emotional

circuitry was pumping out, “he did ask us to divert Megatron as long as we could.”

Ironhide let out an incredulous bark of laughter. “Well, I guess by the time we’re done helpin’ him take over *this* planet, Prime’ll have gotten Cybertron back into pretty decent shape. Just in time for Megatron to start smashing it all up again.”

Ratchet laughed, helplessly, joy surging through him. “I don’t know, Ironhide, but I’m thinking maybe we might find a way to compromise by the time we get there.”

#

Megatron stopped into the new infirmary later that same day: it was still pretty rough, since Ratchet had told Scavenger and Bonecrusher to make it big, not pretty, as the first order of business: the walls and ceiling were still just jagged stone where they’d carved and smashed it open. But Mixmaster had put down a floor of smooth ultraconcrete, level to within 0.2 nanometers, and Ironhide and Brawn had helped Ratchet move down all the equipment out of the ship’s medbay, so it was already taking shape. Ratchet was working on expanding the core support unit: he was going to need it for Thundercracker’s operation.

Megatron looked it all over with a critical eye. “We’re going to dismantle the rest of the ship for supplies. I’m giving Soundwave first priority, but you can go through after him. I trust you’ll be restrained.”

“Nope,” Ratchet said cheerfully. “Hook and Wheeljack will argue their tanks dry over anything I leave, so I might as well just take it all and make them have to gang up against me.”

Megatron snorted, almost a chuckle. “In that case, when they complain to me, I’ll inform them their only recourse is to persuade you.”

Ratchet handed him the schematic Wheeljack had roughed out for the cerebro-booster. “The basic design’s done, but I’ll need some volunteers from the local mechs to fine-tune it.”

Megatron nodded, studying the design. “I’ll have Loadedge find you candidates. Focus on the security mechs, first. They appear reasonably standardized, and produced in large quantities—and key to the planetary defenses.”

“This isn’t going to be like flipping a switch,” Ratchet said. “If it works, this should give them all some mental breathing room—the ability to imagine something better than the situation they’re in. But it’s not going to make them instantly switch sides: I’m not Bombshell.”

“You don’t say,” Megatron said dryly. “Loosen them up, and leave the motivation to me. Either they’ll run from us, or they’ll join us. And while you’re working with those volunteers, I want you and Hook to try and improve their combat capabilities. They’re already on our side: I want them capable of taking more than a glancing shot from an underpowered turbolaser. Start with Loadedge himself. His armor is more pathetic than yours, and that’s saying a great deal.”

“The improvements I can make will depend on materials,” Ratchet said. “Durasteel’s not exactly growing on the trees around here.”

“I’m sending Scavenger and Ravage to the ruins of Priatol City along with Rumble,” Megatron said. “He’ll set off a few more quakes to support the local theory of some sort of natural disaster, and they’ll salvage as much as they can.” He frowned irritably. “We still haven’t located a single mine on the planet.”

“Sounds like a good plan, anyway,” Ratchet said carefully. No sense in letting Megatron find out

about the planet's little secret until *after* he'd dug in and committed.

Megatron handed him back the schematic, but he didn't leave right away, studying Ratchet narrowly. "I find myself curious about something."

"Why I stayed?" Ratchet said.

"Hardly," Megatron said. "That was eminently predictable: after that grandiose speech telling me that I'd have to *shoot you* or you'd sail off alone looking for trapped mechs? Of course you were going to stay, as soon as it wasn't blatantly futile. Why are you *happy*? Your comrades certainly aren't, for all they couldn't escape the trap they've put themselves into with your Autobot nonsense of compassion."

Ratchet laughed, realizing Megatron was right: he *was* happy, happier than he'd been in he didn't know how long. Probably since the morning he'd ended up on his back off the Iacon highway, with a pillar of smoke and ash rising into the sky like some horrible beacon of war. "Megatron, you're full of crap."

"*What* was that?" Megatron said, almost incredulously.

"Oh, come on," Ratchet said. "Our Autobot nonsense of compassion, my afterburners. Peace through tyranny, the strong crushing the weak, victory at all costs—yeah, you *talk* a good game. But when it actually comes down to it, you just threw your entire empire away to start a crusade to save the weakest, most helpless mechs in the entire universe."

Megatron took a step towards him, almost incandescently outraged. "Listen, you dimwitted Autobot lackey—"

Ratchet couldn't help it, he laughed again. He felt like he'd drunk another cube of that ultra-refined too fast. "And—and not wanting your soldiers to *love* you like Optimus," he said, high-pitched with hilarity. "You think *Optimus* lets Autobots bang him twenty at a time because it helps them deal with their neurotrauma loads? He sure doesn't!"

"I'm three seconds from ripping out your—"

"Why did Straxus leave Cybertron?" Ratchet interrupted.

Megatron paused. "What?" He sounded suddenly wary.

"He said he had to flee pursuit," Ratchet said. "But he wouldn't have left the planet to get away from *Autobots*, he'd have run to his Decepticon buddies. So he was running from you. Did *he* try to kill you, too? You really *don't* mind that in your people."

Megatron glared at him furiously. "He was still a Decepticon!"

"Yeah," Ratchet said. "And you want Decepticons to be brilliant, determined, and ruthless, and you want them to question authority, even if it means they try to stab you in the back, and you *don't* want them to be tractable—because that's what your creators tried to make *you*."

Megatron drew back a little; his scowl had sunk into an unwillingly caught, half-surprised look, and Ratchet had another surfacing flash of insight: "Straxus—he left after the Spire, didn't he? He had a more complex ambition module than Starscream, he actually wanted to rule, so when he realized he didn't have a shot, he left to find some other world to conquer..." He trailed off; Megatron had jerked his head briefly away, his jaw clenched, as if Ratchet had said something he didn't want to hear. "*That's* the real reason you don't use that weapon all that often, isn't it?" Ratchet said slowly.

“Because it scares even your own officers into obedience.”

“I don’t *need* to risk my own existence and destroy massive amounts of useful infrastructure for that purpose, Autobot. I maintain a wide variety of options for scaring my officers into obedience,” Megatron said savagely, wheeling back towards him, eyes glowing. “Something *you* had better keep in mind.”

It did work for tamping down Ratchet’s almost effervescent joy, but not the way Megatron wanted. Because the picture was coming clear in his head, the one he got for any patient he treated for any length of time: the network of interlacing thought processes and emotional routines flowing through them, the web of personality and mind, and he got clearly that what Megatron meant was—that *he* was scared, of one of the few things that could touch him.

“We won’t lose Starscream to it,” Ratchet said gently, and Megatron stiffened. “You got the heavy lifting done. His ambition module’s not stalling out anymore, and it’s open to rerouting. I’ll be able to help him broaden the range of targets so he doesn’t get stuck the same way again.” He paused a moment, then he took a shot and added, “I might even be able to help him redirect it onto the cause and off your, uh—”

Megatron glared at him again, but the heat had unwillingly drained out of it. “All right, medic, you’ve tested the limits of my patience far enough. Does *Prime* tolerate this sort of thing from you?”

“Yep,” Ratchet said. “Don’t worry, he used to hate it too, but after the first hundred thousand years or so, he got used to it.”

“I’m glad to have something to look forward to,” Megatron growled. “Tell me, are you still going to be happy when we finish conquering this planet, take its vast stores of energon—and yes, I *have* noticed you and Wheeljack making your pathetic attempts at diverting me from its source, as though it weren’t enough to see the results—and go back to Cybertron to crush your comrades?”

“Nah, not going to happen,” Ratchet said.

“You don’t think so?” Megatron said silkily.

“There’s not going to be a fight when we get back to Cybertron,” Ratchet said. “Optimus is going to be more than happy to see you.”

Megatron snorted. “Do you mean to fill him with tales of my *compassion*? Be my guest: I’ll alter his sentiments in short order.”

“That would take a lot of doing, Megatron,” Ratchet said. “He’s been looking for you for, oh, five million years now.”

“What?” Megatron said, baffled.

“He thinks the Matrix should be passed on,” Ratchet said. “He just hasn’t been able to find—”

Megatron actually burst out laughing. “The next Prime? And you mean to nominate *me*? You’ve taken *core damage*.”

“Not a smidge,” Ratchet said. “I think a couple million years carrying around the accumulated wisdom and compassion of all the great leaders of Cybertron is *just* what the doctor ordered for you.” He grinned as Megatron abruptly stopped laughing and glared at him instead. “Megatron Prime. Has a ring to it, don’t you think?”

“I *don't*,” Megatron snapped.

“You know,” Ratchet went on thoughtfully, “the Matrix has some pretty intense powers. Most Autobot leaders haven’t been able to tap more than five percent of its capacity. Optimus has gotten all the way to ten percent, but I had to reconfigure his system to dedicate more processing to the job. *Your* processor speed—you can probably get something like fifty percent. Think you’ll be able to turn that kind of power down when it’s offered to you?”

“We’re done discussing this idiotic subject,” Megatron said.

“Whatever you say,” Ratchet said, although he had to call it down the hallway after Megatron’s retreating back. Yeah, they were going back to Cybertron to crush everyone, sure. Actually, he’d eat his hydrospanner if Optimus didn’t end up having to come *here*. And quite possibly having to chase Megatron around the galaxy for a good ten thousand years trying to shove the Matrix into his chest. But Ratchet had a lot of faith in Optimus’s resolve. He laughed softly again as he bent back down over the module’s circuitry: he *was* happy, because his war, his endless war, was over.

# End

## End Notes

With many thanks to monicawoe for beta! All feedback loved. If you like, [reblog](#)!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!